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CHINA, THE CONFUCIAN IDEAL, AND THE EUROPEAN AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

BY WALTER W. DAVIS

During the 17th and 18th centuries, Europeans manifested an almost unbounded enthusiasm for diaries and informative tomes written by Western merchants, diplomats, missionaries, and travelers concerning the Americas, Africa, Persia, India, China, and “the Indies.” Whether factual or purely fictional, these accounts enthralled Westerners and fired their imaginations. The theme of the “noble savage” received a sympathetic response and gave rise to a rather naive humanitarian idealism that extolled primitive virtues presumed but not proven. Fanciful tales appealed to man’s insatiable propensity for fantasy and his desire to escape from the known evils of his own society to the blissful delights supposedly enjoyed by primitive peoples. Under such conditions, the natural goodness of man, romantically alluded to by those rejecting the Christian doctrine of man’s fall, could putatively blossom forth to the benefit of all; yet for most writers, especially those of France, praise of some distant Utopia remained merely an instrument of social criticism—a means of denouncing corrupt practices, inept government, religious dogmatism, economic ills, or urban luxury and artificiality without running afoul of the censors.¹

Descriptions of China—an ancient and highly developed civilization replete with historical lore, quaint customs, and a humanistic moral philosophy—were particularly appealing. Indeed, Neo-Confucianism appeared to be the ideal prototype for a deistic ethical system espoused by many European intellectuals.² Deism had its inception in a desire to establish a rational religion consonant with all creeds but embracing none. It presumed the existence of a Divine Providence as author of the cosmic order—a supreme deity whose natural laws governed the universe. Man should conduct himself in

¹ Concerning the uncritical praise of primitive or exotic cultures at this time, see Henri Baudet, *Paradise on Earth: Some Thoughts on European Images of Non-European Man* (trans. Elizabeth Wentholt; New Haven & London, 1965), chap. 2.

² Neo-Confucianism, as used in this article, refers only to the rational revival of Confucianism—particularly the teachings of Confucius and Mencius—which was brought about by Chou Tun-i (1017-73), Ch’eng Hao (1032-85), Ch’eng I (1033-1107), Chang Tsai (1020-77), and Shao Yung (1011-77) and synthesized by Chu Hsi (1130-1200) during the Sung Dynasty (960-1279). It does not refer to late and variant forms of Neo-Confucian thought in the “mind school” of Lu Hsiang-Shen (1139-93) and Wang Yang-ming (1473-1529) or the “empirical school” of Tai Tung-yuan (1723-77) which were unknown to the Western enlighteners.

conformity with these laws as he rationally conceived them and lead a moral and upright life, treating everyone as he would be treated, and rendering to deity and his fellow men their proper due. In accordance with how one fulfilled these obligations, he would be recompensed after death with rewards or punishments.

Like deism, Neo-Confucian metaphysics resulted from a perceived need to meet a challenge: in the case of Deism, divisive or antipathetic sectarianism; in the case of Confucianism, the inroads into Chinese society of Buddhism and Taoism. In both cases, an irenic and rational accommodation was philosophically provided. For the Neo-Confucians, this involved assimilation of certain Buddhist or Taoist elements into their ethical system—the creation of a metaphysics which neither Confucius nor Mencius nor any of the early teachers could have foreseen; for though they did not deny the existence of deity, they confined their preachments to man's relations with his fellow man in this world. Borrowed from Taoism was the doctrine of self-transformation involving the Tao, and its two interacting modes of *yin* and *yang*, while from Hua-Yen Buddhism was taken the concept of *li*, the undifferentiated, self-caused, eternal, inalterable, self-evident cosmic principle—the source, the essence, and highest standard of all things. Emanating from the Great Ultimate was material force (*ch'i*) in the dual modes of *yin* and *yang*.

The Great Ultimate through movement generates *yang* [active force]. When its activity reaches its limit, it becomes tranquil. Through tranquility, the Great Ultimate generates *yin* [passive force]. When tranquility reaches its limit, activity begins again. So movement and tranquility alternate and become the root of each other, giving rise to the distinction of *yin* and *yang*, and the two modes of material force are thus established.³

The incessant and perpetual oscillation of *yin* and *yang*, as they

³ Selection from Chou Tun-i's *T'ai-chi-t'u shuo* as published in Chu Hsi and Lu Tsu-ch'ien, *Reflections on Things at Hand: The Neo-Confucian Anthology* (trans. Wing-tsit Chan; New York & London, 1967), I, 1, 5. It was this synthesis of Neo-Confucian thought that became familiar to Leibniz and other Western thinkers of the early enlightenment. For additional commentary on Sung Neo-Confucian cosmology see Derk Bodde, "Harmony and Conflict in Chinese Philosophy," *Studies in Chinese Thought* (ed. Arthur F. Wright; Chicago, 1953), 19-26; Wing-tsit Chan, "The Story of Chinese Philosophy" in *Philosophy-East and West*, ed. Charles A. Moore (Princeton, 1946), 55-60; Wing-tsit Chan, "Synthesis in Chinese Metaphysics" in *Essays in East-West Philosophy: An Attempt at World Philosophical Synthesis* (ed. Charles A. Moore; Honolulu, 1951), 163-70; Wing-tsit Chan, "The Evolution of the New-Confucian Concept of *Li* as Principle" in *Neo-Confucianism, etc.: Essays by Wing-tsit Chan* compiled by Charles K. H. Chen (Hanover & Amherst, 1969), 69-71; and Julia Ching, "Truth and Ideology: The Confucian Way (*Tao*) and Its Transmission (*Tao-T'ung*)," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 35, no. 3 (July-Sept. 1974), 375-77.

harmoniously interact and give rise to one another, brings into existence the five agents of water, fire, wood, metal, and earth. All things result and constantly reproduce themselves in the continuous interplay of these forces, and all things possess *li*—the principle of being or reason, so that all are in the Great Ultimate and the Great Ultimate is in all. Thus, the universal and the particular are complementary and interdependent aspects of reality. However, as one of the Sung masters of Neo-Confucian thought proclaimed:

It is man alone who receives the material forces in their highest excellence, and therefore he is most intelligent. His physical form appears, and his spirit develops consciousness. The five moral principles of his nature [humanity (*jen*), righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness] are aroused by, and react to, the external world and engage in activity; and good and evil are distinguished. . . .⁴

Man is equipped through reason, therefore, to understand the immutable and harmonious moral order of the universe—what Occidentals might term “natural law.” Since he possesses *li*, he has a natural propensity for doing what is right and good.

Without going into the ramifications of the Neo-Confucian doctrine of the inherent goodness of man at this point—one which, in any case, a number of *philosophes* (though far from all of them) would have found objectionable,⁵ let us simply note the remarkable coincidence between deism and the Neo-Confucian conception of an impersonal Tao or Great Ultimate whose essence—eternal principle—controls and is inextricably identified with the universe and is comprehensible to man through reason. The necessity to live

⁴ Chou Tun-i in Chu Hsi & Lu Tsu-ch'ien, *op. cit.*, I, 1, p. 6.

⁵ On this subject, see Lester G. Crocker, *An Age of Crisis: Man and World in Eighteenth-Century French Thought* (Baltimore, 1959), 325-76. The concept of the inherent goodness of man would have a special attraction for thinkers who accepted the existence of a uniform and universal natural law. Even among them, however, there were those who found such a concept of human nature unnecessary, though denying that human nature was evil. Still, notwithstanding their varying views concerning the nature of man, most of the early “enlighteners” optimistically believed in his dignity and perfectibility. It should also be stated that there were many who, like the third Earl of Shaftesbury, did believe in the original goodness of human nature. A deist, he identified the good with the true and the beautiful, and postulated a moral code founded upon reason rather than religion. His belief in the “natural affections” of the individual for all mankind is similar to the Neo-Confucian doctrine of *jen*, and his emphasis upon perfecting the individual rather than trying to change society by external reforms is close to the Neo-Confucian ideal of self-cultivation and perfection [Cf. Book of Menicus, Bk. VII, quoted in William S. A. Pott, *Chinese Political Philosophy (Political Science Classic)*, ed. Lindsay Rogers (New York, 1925), 38].

virtuously and righteously according to *li* (natural law) corresponds directly to deistic tenets, as does also the correlative obligation to live in harmony with one's fellowmen, rendering to everyone his appropriate due. Nevertheless, the correspondence between deism and Neo-Confucian ethics is approximate rather than exact. For example, Neo-Confucianists did not believe in personal immortality in the Western sense, rendering the deistic concept of rewards or punishments after death irrelevant. In this respect, their views were more analogous to those of naturalists such as Diderot rather than to those of the deists.

Neither the Western deists nor the Chinese believed in a personal or anthropomorphic God. Early Confucianism did not concern itself with metaphysics at all; but when Confucian scholars of the Sung period tried to deal with the incursions of Taoism and Buddhism, they worked out a synthesis of Confucian ethics and certain elements of the two religions. Assimilated, for example, were the premises of the Way and the Vital Force; still, there was no deity in the Christian sense but only a life-giving cosmic principle by which all things had been brought into existence and were being sustained. Similarly, European deists, in effect, established their own cosmology—one that did not require a God who must be approached through sacraments dispensed by priests, or one explicated by Christian divines to the credulous masses. Theirs was a cosmology predicated only upon a first cause and the rational operation of natural law. In both cases, the universe was controlled by fixed and immutable forces; but while the Oriental sought, through introspective thought and by following accepted rituals, to acquiesce in the workings of nature and live in harmony with his fellows, the typical *philosophe* would seek to “discover” natural laws in order, through the exercise of reason or empirical investigation, to make himself master of society and the physical universe. However, in neither case was there any need for a personal deity; only the source and its concomitant vital force were required by the Chinese mind, and a postulated first cause provided a sufficient philosophical premise for the Western enlighteners.⁶

As applied in the practical sphere of ethics, the philosophical assumptions of either China or the West could be adapted to permit, in varying degrees, the exercise of free will. For Western intellectuals, there was no problem because the quest for discovering natural laws presumed the free exercise of the intellect. For the Chinese the situation was different because Taoism could be interpreted in a deterministic sense. Nevertheless, their metaphysics was added long after practical, man-centered Confucianism was well established. Their

⁶ Even a First Cause was not required by the naturalists. See James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic World View Catalog* (Downers Grove, Illinois, 1976), 58-75.

ethical system was geared, therefore, to social needs rather than determined by their cosmology. Neo-Confucianism may have become an amalgam containing Taoist and Buddhist elements, but Confucian humanism remained dominant. Besides, the historically minded Chinese disliked even a man-imposed system of legalism such as the Ch'in emperor (221-207 B.C.) had tried to enforce. Therefore, Neo-Confucian principles were fairly moderate. The proper standard of conduct (*li*) prescribed in the *Book of Rites (Li chi)* must be ritually observed in one's personal relationships—those between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, and older friend and younger friend. The requisite ceremonies were considered not merely a matter of form but rather a means of conditioning oneself to natural principles so that, as Confucian scholar Hsun Tzu (ca. 298-238 B.C.) declared: "Without considering, without thinking, He obeys the laws of God."⁷

Elsewhere he explained that for the purpose of curbing disorder the ancient kings established ritual principles through which human desires could be realized in a manner consonant with social harmony and the common welfare. Indeed, rituals were a part of nature itself:

Through rites, Heaven and earth join in harmony, the sun and moon shine, the four seasons proceed in order, the stars and constellations march, the rivers flow, and all things flourish; men's likes and dislikes are regulated and their joys and hates made appropriate. Those below are obedient, those above are enlightened; only he who turns his back upon rites will be destroyed. . . . In the world those who obey the dictates of ritual will achieve order; those who turn against them will be lost.⁸

It is quite apparent from the foregoing discussion that Confucianism was much more specific in its prescriptions of social responsibilities than Western deism; yet the intention was similar. A general rule for one's relationships with others was reciprocity: "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others";⁹ and for situations not covered by any specified obligations, one should act according to the golden mean, avoiding extremes. Moderation and propriety were the watchwords. "Perfect is the virtue which is according to the constant mean!"¹⁰ taught Confucius; and "to go beyond it is as wrong as to fall short."¹¹

⁷ Hsun Tzu, I: "Encouraging Learning" as published in *Basic Writings of Mo Tzu, Hsun Tzu, and Han Fei Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York, 1964), part II, 30.

⁸ *Ibid.*, XIX: "A Discussion of Rites," part II, 94.

⁹ The *Analects* of Confucius, Bk. XV, chap. XXIII, in the *Chinese Classics*, trans. James Legge; vol. I: *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean* (Hong Kong-London, 1861), 165.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Bk. VI, chap. XXVII, 571.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Bk. XI, chap. XIV, 3, 106. See also the treatment in Charles A. Moore, "Comparative Philosophies of Life" in *Philosophy-East and West, op. cit.*, 293-294.

In a position of wealth and honour, one . . . does what is proper to a position, of wealth and honour. In a poor and low position, he does what is proper to a poor and low position. Situated among barbarous tribes, he does what is proper to a situation among barbarous tribes. In a position of sorrow and difficulty, he does what is proper to a position of sorrow and difficulty. The superior man can find himself in no situation in which he is not himself.¹²

The superior person should be motivated by a spirit of “benevolence” (*jen*) or, as it is perhaps more accurately translated, “humanity.”¹³ To the ancient philosophers, including Mencius, *jen* meant universal love of mankind. The term became even more inclusive in the 11th century when it was extended to embrace not only people, but all things, so that, in effect, man became one with the universe.¹⁴

Mo Tzu (ca. 478-381 B.C.), who was judged unorthodox by Mencius (ca. 372-289 B.C.) and his school, said that *jen* consisted in loving all men equally as one loved himself,¹⁵ but Confucians as a whole insisted that, while *jen* was universal, it must be practiced according to graded priorities. Above all, one must show love in a very practical and individual way to his parents before demonstrating it, to a somewhat lesser degree, in each of the five relationships, and finally to the world at large.¹⁶ Filial piety was both the fountainhead of benevolence (*jen*) and the foundation of Chinese society. By assiduously practicing it, one also nourished his “humanity” and affection for all men, but if he did not love his parents, he was a “rebel” against “virtue” and against “sacred custom.”¹⁷ Filial piety would inevitably engender a concomitant feeling of “commiseration” for all men. Indeed, such tender sentiments were inherent in man’s nature. Ch’eng Hao insisted:

The feeling of commiseration pervades the whole body. It can be aroused

¹² *The Doctrine of the Mean*, XIV, 2, *ibid.*, 259.

¹³ The fact that *jen* has been translated in various ways indicates that there is no completely satisfactory one-word English equivalent. James Legge called it “perfect virtue,” Arthur Waley “Goodness,” and others “human-heartedness” or “love.” As Wing-tsit Chan points out (“The Concept of Man in Chinese Thought,” *Neo-Confucianism, etc.* . . . , 150), “the term denotes . . . moral life at its best. . . . It includes filial piety, wisdom, propriety, courage and loyalty to government . . . and requires the practice of earnestness, liberality, truthfulness, diligence, and generosity.” For further expositions, see Y. P. Mei, “The Basis of Social, Ethical, and Spiritual, Values in Chinese Philosophy” in *Essays in East-West Philosophy* . . . , 303-305.

¹⁴ Chu Hsi & Lu Tzu-ch’ien, *op. cit.*, I, 1, p. 6, and I, 17, p. 17.

¹⁵ Mo Tzu III, 16: “Universal Love,” in *Basic Writings of Mo Tzu, Hsün Tzu, and Han Fei Tzu*, part I, 39-42.

¹⁶ Cf. *The Book of Mencius*, 7A, 46, in W.A.C.H. Dobson (trans. & ed.), *Mencius* (Toronto, 1969), 146; and Wing-tsit Chan, “The Evolution of the Confucian Concept of Jen,” 35 & *passim*.

¹⁷ See the discussion in Yu-Wei Hsieh, “Filial Piety and Chinese Society” in *Philosophy and Culture—East and West: Philosophy in Practical Perspective*, ed. Charles A. Moore (Honolulu, 1962), 414-15.

anywhere. For example, we have a feeling of commiseration when we see a child about to fall into a well. When we see an ant in similar danger, do we not have the same feeling?¹⁸

Compassion was the natural corollary of man's goodness. According to Mencius:

From the feelings proper to it [man's nature], it is constituted for the practice of what is good. This is what I mean in saying that the nature is good. If men do what is not good, the blame can not be imputed to their natural powers. The feeling of commiseration belongs to all men; so does that of shame and dislike; and that of reverence and respect; and that of approving and disapproving. The feeling of commiseration implies the principle of benevolence; that of shame and dislike, the principle of righteousness; that of reverence and respect, the principle of propriety; and that of approving and disapproving, the principle of knowledge. Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and knowledge are not infused from without.¹⁹

Charity must begin in the home. Through devotion to his family, the individual would come to realize that all people were his brothers and sisters and all things his companions.²⁰ It behooved one, therefore, to manifest his love to everyone, in the confident knowledge that, in so doing, he was nurturing his own nature. Thus, *jen* was more than a worthy standard: it was a dynamic, creative, energizing moral force—the very spirit of life by which man could transform himself, his society, and ultimately the universe.²¹

In the last analysis, then, it was self-cultivation that set into motion and nurtured this entire process of transformation—a self-development dependent upon both moral and intellectual growth:

Let us make up our minds to "honor our moral nature and follow the path of study and inquiry" [*Doctrine of the Mean*, ch. 27]. Let us ask ourselves every day whether we have done anything contrary to the subject of our inquiry and study or have neglected our moral nature in any way. . . .²²

It is fundamental to understand what is good. Hold it firmly and it will be

¹⁸ Ch'eng Hao, *I-shu*, 3:32, in Chu Hsi and Lu Tsu-ch'ien, *op. cit.*, I, 24 (p. 21).

¹⁹ *Book of Mencius*, VII, quoted in Pott, *op. cit.*, 38. See also *Mencius*, 2A, 6 (p. 132).

²⁰ Paraphrased from the Ch'eng brothers' *Ts'ui Yen*, ch. II, quoted in Chan, "The Story of Chinese Philosophy," 61.

²¹ For a more thorough treatment, see Wing-tsit Chan, "The Neo-Confucian Solution of the Problem of Evil" in *Neo-Confucianism, etc.* . . . , 105-07. The concept of *jen* as a life-force was first developed in the works of the Ch'eng brothers (11th century) and expressed in the synthetic writings of Chu Hsi. See for example: Chu Hsi & Lu Tsu-Ch'ien, *op. cit.*, I, 23 (p. 21) and II, 95 (p. 83). See also the *Doctrine of the Mean*, XXII, as quoted in Hsieh, *op. cit.*, 412.

²² Chu Hsi & Lu Tsu-Ch'ien, *op. cit.*, II, 94 (pp. 82-83).

established in you. . . . Extend it and enlarge it and it will be great. Neglect it and it will be small. . . .²³

Fulfillment of one's nature was of paramount importance and was strongly emphasized by Confucius himself.²⁴ However, self-development also presumed, indeed required, rational inquiry as well in order to "investigate the *li* of all things . . . ; for the intelligent mind of man is certainly formed to know, and there is not a single thing in which *li* does not inhere. . . ." ²⁵ Since *li* resided in the investigator, as well as in the entire universe and the "myriad things" composing it, the knower could conduct his inquiry with "sympathetic intelligence" and a spirit of unity, but must be diligent, both in his practice and in his intellectual activity, to pursue his investigation of *li* in everything about him until he reached "the limit."²⁶

Analogous to the Oriental doctrine of commiseration was the Western emphasis on humanitarian feeling. The cult of *sensibilité* emerged from the French salons, and novels of sensibility—revealing the sentiments of the characters and inducing the reader's emotional involvement—became popular in England during the 1730s. But, more than this, the "irresistible compassion" of the human personality was being extolled. As early as the 17th century, Henry More (1614-1687), one of the Cambridge Platonists, proclaimed in his *Enchiridion Ethicum* (1666) that human emotions stemmed from God and could be relied upon to dictate what was "good and just." He stressed the salutary character of "commiseration," which was evoked by God in the human breast to motivate response to the needs of others.²⁷ More's views were echoed by Latitudinarian clergymen, one of them stating that we are benevolently moved to compassion "when our bowels are touched with a sensible pain at the view of any calamitous object; when our fancies are disturbed at the report of any disaster befalling a man; when the sight of a tragedy wringeth compassion and tears from us."²⁸

²³ *Ibid.*, II, 93 (p. 82).

²⁴ See, e.g., *The Great Learning*, I, 4, 5, & 6 in *The Chinese Classics*, I, 221-23.

²⁵ Quoted from a commentary by Chu Hsi in Chan, "Synthesis in Chinese Metaphysics," 173; see also Chan, "The Evolution of the Neo-Confucian Concept of *Li* . . .," 75.

²⁶ Chan, "Synthesis in Chinese Metaphysics," 173.

²⁷ Norman S. Fiering, "Irresistible Compassion: An Aspect of Eighteenth-Century Sympathy and Humanitarianism," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37, no. 2 (April-June 1976), 198-200.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 201. Fiering quotes from Isaac Barrow's *Theological Works* (Oxford, 1830), II, 78-79. Certain British thinkers, including Dugald Stewart, David Hume, Adam Smith, and Abraham Tucker, stressed the role of the mind in educating compassion. On this subject, see John B. Radner, "The Art of Sympathy in Eighteenth-Century British Moral Thought," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 9 (1979), 189-210.

Numbered among the proponents of “irresistible compassion” were such men as the French Augustinian scholar Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715), Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), moral philosophers William Wollaston (1660-1724) and Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), and Adam Smith (1723-90), whose *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) may have been inspired in part by the condensed version of the *Book of Mencius* translated by Jean Baptiste DuHalde (1674-1743).²⁹ By shortly after mid-century, it was almost an ethical dictum that God-given feelings of compassion could guide men toward virtue and should be observed unless, as some writers cautioned, they were overruled by reason. Toleration and humanitarianism were at high tide.

For more than two centuries, humanistic dreams of a “brave new world” had been expressed in utopian literature. But if Europe had its utopian authors—Sir Thomas More (*Utopia*, 1516), Tommaso Campanella (*Civitas solis*, 1633), Francis Bacon (*The New Atlantis*, 1627), James Harrington (*Oceana*, 1656), Cyrano de Bergerac (*Voyage dans la lune*, 1657), François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon (*Télémaque*, 1699), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*La Nouvelle Héloïse*, 1761), Denis Diderot, *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, 1772), Louis Sébastien Mercier (*L’an deux mille quatre cent quarante*, 1770), and others—so did China. However, unlike the majority of these examples, the Chinese utopia was neither projected into the future nor located in a fantasy land nor an exotic clime: it consisted in a semi-legendary realm—that of the ancient homeland with its wise and virtuous kings. These enlightened rulers allegedly governed as Heaven would have them to govern, humanely and justly, for the benefit of their people.

If the prince is a man of Humanity, then nothing in his state but will be Humane. If the prince is a man of Justice, then nothing in his state but will be Just. If the prince is a man of rectitude, then nothing in his state but will be upright. . . .³⁰

The prince must constantly keep his duties in mind and fulfill them with all diligence. “The art of governing is to keep its affairs before the mind without weariness, and to practice them with undeviating consistency.”³¹ But more than this, the prince must take care to appoint men of merit to high government posts, maintain peace and order, and look after the material welfare of his people—being careful, for example, not to tax produce and merchandise sold in public markets or to levy imposts or tolls at provincial frontiers. A one-tenth tax should be levied on all lands in proportion to their productivity, but tax farming, such as was prevalent in France during the old re-

²⁹ Lewis A. Maverick, *China a Model for Europe* (San Antonio, 1946), 25.

³⁰ *Mencius*, 4A, 21 (p. 136).

³¹ *Analects*, Bk. XII, chap. XIV, 121.

gime, was to be prohibited as were all wasteful or extravagant practices.³² Education should be encouraged; orphans, widows, and the poor should be cared for; and, in the case of “those who belong to the five incapacitated groups [probably referring to those who were deaf, dumb, crippled, lacking a limb, or dwarfed], the government should gather them together, look after them, and give them whatever work they are able to do. . . .”³³

All ceremonies, music, and punitive expeditions should emanate from the Emperor if matters are as they should be. If these matters are in the hands of the princes, bad government will prevail. . . . The same will be the case if subsidiary ministers grasp control. . . . Factionalism is detrimental to the realm.³⁴

Ceremonies were important to maintain for the sake of maintaining respect for authority, and the Emperor should set an example for his subjects.

If a superior love propriety, the people will not dare not to be reverent. If he love righteousness, the people will not dare not to submit to his example. If he love good faith, the people will not dare not to be sincere. Now, when these things obtain, the people from all quarters will come to him, bearing their children on their backs.³⁵

Time and again, the Chinese classics make the point that the wise and humane ruler will attract people into his realms, bringing benefit to the state. The same thought may be observed in the populationist theories of the 17th- and 18th-century cameralists, and the so-called “enlightened despots” of Europe endeavored, for economic reasons, to attract able-bodied, skilled immigrants.

Of course, by the 18th century, China’s population had grown to the point where immigration no longer was considered to be beneficial. Nevertheless, the benevolent ruler would take to heart his people’s welfare and would strive to avoid war to spare them suffering and possible ruin.

The ruler who relies on force to conquer other states inflicts injury not only on the people whom he conquers but also on his own. Daily the people of other states will become more eager to fight against him while his own people will grow less eager to fight in his defense; therefore, “the ruler who relies upon strength will . . . be reduced to weakness. He acquires territory but loses the support of his people; his worries increase while his accomplishments dwindle. He finds himself with more and more cities to guard and less and less means to guard them with. . . .”³⁶

³² See *Hsün Tzu*, IX (part II, 30 & 43).

³³ *Ibid.*, IX (part II, 34 & 37). Joseph II implemented policies of this very nature. See Walter W. Davis, *Joseph II: An Imperial Reformer for the Austrian Netherlands* (The Hague, 1974), chap. 6.

³⁴ *Analects*, Bk. XVI, chap. II, 174.

³⁵ *Analects*, Bk XIII, chap. IV, 3, 129.

³⁶ *Hsun Tzu*, IX (part II, 39).

On the whole, Neo-Confucian tenets were accorded a favorable reception in Europe throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. This was due in no small part to the fact that the vast majority of the works published on China were written by Jesuit missionaries determined to depict the Chinese as a people who, from primitive times, had recognized the “Lord of Heaven” and whose Neo-Confucian ethics inclined them to be receptive to Christian truths.

Reasons for the Jesuits’ encomia are not difficult to discern. From the time when Father Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) established the mission in 1582, they had striven to master the Confucian classics and had worked in court circles among the literati in the hope that, by converting these respected leaders, they would soon Christianize the entire country. Initially this approach appeared to be highly successful. Not only were numerous converts claimed, but the missionaries were readily accepted among the ruling classes. The policy was not without risk, however, nor did it go unchallenged. Other church orders—particularly the mendicants—had long been jealous of the special prerogatives accorded to the Society of Jesus and of the preponderant influence they wielded as confessors to European monarchs. Moreover, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), speaking in behalf of the French Jansenists, had accused the Jesuits of casuistry, of prostituting their principles in order to win converts or retain the good will of the prominent and powerful. Unfortunately for the Jesuit fathers, these charges seemed to be borne out in China by their policy of accommodating indigenous practices, a policy construed as compromise with paganism by Dominicans and Franciscans resentful of the virtual monopoly enjoyed by the Jesuit missions in East Asia. When their rivals accused them of assenting to idolatry by permitting converts to continue to engage in the rituals of “ancestor worship,” the Jesuits endeavored to depreciate the rites as mere civil conventions and to call attention to the steady progress of missionary efforts in China, the country’s growing receptivity to Christianity (as evidenced in the Edict of Toleration issued by the Emperor K’angshih in 1692), and the natural affinity between Neo-Confucian ethics and Christianity. To do so, they slanted their accounts of Chinese history and thought or introduced their translations of Chinese classics in a manner favorable to their cause; yet they ultimately failed to avert the censure of Rome and, by their devious efforts, inadvertently played themselves into the hands of libertines and rationalists who saw in Confucian philosophy the basis for natural religion.³⁷

³⁷ A thoughtful, critical account of the scholarly work of the Jesuits in China is available in Virgile Pinot, *La Chine et la formation de l’esprit philosophique en France (1640-1740)* (Genève, 1971), esp. chap. 2. A brief treatment sympathetic to the Jesuits, but making no attempt to examine the sources and evaluate their veracity, may be found in Donald W. Treadgold, *The West in Russia and China: Religious and Secular Thought in Modern Times*, vol. 2: *China, 1582-1949* (Cambridge, 1973), 5-34.

Due to the rites controversy, the Jesuits dared not present the Chinese of antiquity as superstitious animists and demon worshippers but as believers in a deity closely resembling the Christian God. To have done otherwise would have been tantamount to denying the correctness and efficacy of their moderate methods of winning converts and would corroborate Pierre Bayle's (1647-1706) contention that morality could be established without the support of religion. Therefore, the Jesuit publicists continued to depict the Chinese as rational, spiritually minded people favorably disposed toward the gospel—a view that encouraged Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) in his attempts to reunify the church and bring all men together in a great universal faith, while, at the same time, it confirmed the deists in their opinion that a rational belief in a divine providence sufficed.

In passing beyond the usual bounds of theological disputation, the rites controversy had the salutary effect of focusing the attention of a large segment of European intellectuals upon publications dealing with the Orient. From the viewpoint of the church, however, the results were deplorable; for the opinions of the Jesuits were selected, amplified, and interpreted to foster a secular-minded religiosity, deism, materialism, and atheism.³⁸

To the *philosophes*, the Chinese people—with their tolerant, humanitarian spirit and well-ordered government—were living proof that no society need predicate its ethical and legal systems upon religious sanctions. Bayle was particularly outspoken on this subject. He denounced as preposterous the thesis of Fathers Philippe Couplet, Louis LeCompte (1655-1728) and other Jesuit missionaries that the Chinese from antiquity had worshipped the true God, whose existence was innately known to them as to all men. Bayle unequivocally insisted that the Chinese were superstitious atheists, who had nonetheless succeeded in forming a superior and prosperous civilization. It was abundantly clear, he said, that unbelief was no deterrent to the foundation of an exemplary ethical system.

Challenges to Bayle's emphatically expressed opinions only served to popularize them. Even the Oratorian philosopher Nicolas Malebranche, who undertook to expose the errors of Chinese religion and philosophy, concluded that Bayle's assessment of their atheism was correct; and most Frenchmen, including theologians, came to alter drastically or abandon the Jesuits' contention that all peoples possessed an innate knowledge of God.³⁹

One of the few scholars to support the Jesuits in the rites dispute

³⁸ Cf. Pinot, *loc. cit.* and Robert Shackleton, "Asia as Seen by the French Enlightenment" in Raghavan Iyer's *The Glass Curtain between Asia and Europe* (London, 1965), 178-81.

³⁹ Pinot, *op. cit.*, 297-333.

was Leibniz. He accepted their view that the ancient Chinese had believed in God; and, while maintaining the superior revelation of Christianity, he was intrigued by the possibility of finding common truths in religions throughout the world, which could serve to bring people of all nations together. Cross-fertilization of Eastern and Western cultures could prove quite fruitful, he contended. China had much to learn from the West, while in matters of practical living she had much to offer: indeed, he suggested, Chinese missionaries might well “teach us the aim and practice of natural theology, as we send missionaries . . . to instruct them in revealed theology. . . .”⁴⁰ He even speculated that, in consideration of the antiquity of China, her language might hold some key for discovering the original universal tongue, and he was fascinated by the prospect of discovering in the mystic hexagrams and trigrams of the *I Ching* (*Book of Changes*) evidence of the common origin of man and law.

In view of Leibniz’s known acquaintanceship with Confucian writers and Chu Hsi’s Neo-Confucian synthesis, it would be easy to speculate concerning a possible causal relationship between the Chinese view of *li* as an entelechy and the German philosopher’s monadic hypothesis. As a matter of fact, there is a similarity between the Neo-Confucian concept of the Great Ultimate in all things and all things in the Great Ultimate, and Leibniz’s theory of a pluralistic universe composed of dynamic units termed monads, the infinitesimal embodiments of the universe. Each monad was more than just a fragment of the universe: it was the universe as seen from a particular point of view. The sum total of these viewpoints would give the truth of reality. Only the highest development of all individual energies (monads), acting in unison in conformity with a pre-established harmony, would lead to the truth of being, the supreme harmony (reality). Individuality and universality were inseparable, consisting of the same essence, partaking of the same nature, and maintaining the perfect harmony instilled by the Creator. This theory of pre-established harmony was definitely expounded for the first time in 1714 many years after Leibniz became acquainted with Chinese philosophy; however, it is doubtful that Leibniz’s cosmology was patterned after Chinese metaphysics. In actuality, his monad theory had begun to evolve years before he became well acquainted with Oriental thought and was fairly well defined by 1686, so that his Sinophilism must be considered as a complementary rather than a causal influence. Moreover, the works of Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) concerning

⁴⁰ As quoted in Michael Edwardes, *East-West Passage: The Travel of Ideas, Arts and Inventions between Asia and the Western World* (London, 1971), 104. The original thought was contained in the preface (p. 7) of a letter written by Leibniz on Nov. 21, 1667, entitled *Lettre sur les Progrès de la Religion à la Chine à Monsieur l’abbé de X. . . .*

cosmology—which were familiar to Leibniz—presented a more systematic development of the monad theory than did the Neo-Confucian metaphysics. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that Leibniz considered the Neo-Confucian concept of *li* (the “originative Spirit”) to be essentially correct—a striking corroboration of his own philosophy of an orderly universe created and constantly being regenerated and changed by the dynamic development and action of monads according to their God-ordained natural propensities.⁴¹

Leibniz’s enthusiasm for China spilled over to several of his contemporaries—most notably August Hermann Francke (1663-1727), a member of the theological faculty at Halle, and Christian Wolff, professor of mathematics and natural philosophy at Halle. Francke’s interest in China stemmed mainly from his desire to open the way for a Protestant mission to compete with the Jesuits. He read Leibniz’s *Novissima Sinica* (1697) with unfeigned admiration and founded the *Collegii orientalis theologici* in 1707 to train missionaries. However, his hope to include the study of the Chinese language in the curriculum was dashed for lack of qualified instructors, and his own interest in China gradually waned.

More attuned to the Sinophilism of the day was Christian Wolff (1679-1754). Indeed, in 1723 he was dismissed from Halle, a Pietist stronghold, as the result of a lecture (delivered before the university community two years earlier) praising the merits of Chinese moral philosophy. The Chinese were to be commended, he proclaimed, for developing a rational natural morality, in no way dependent upon religion or revealed truth, in which duty and virtue were exalted.

News of the affair spread across the continent, so that the issue Wolff had raised became a matter of discussion and dispute in academic circles. After accepting an appointment at the University of Marburg, Wolff published the text of his Halle address, adding fuel to the fire. As the scholarly debate intensified, Wolff became the hero of savants favoring natural religion. He politely declined an offer from Peter the Great to become head of the St. Petersburg Academy and, for a time, enjoyed the plaudits of the Jesuits who had long contended that Confucians worshipped the same God as Christians. In France, the Mecca of rationalist thought, the affair had lasting repercussions; for, as a result of it, deism was greatly popularized, even to the extent of invading the theological faculty at the University of Paris.

Several of Wolff’s students or former students wrote in behalf of his position. One of them, Georg Bernhard Bulfinger (1693-1750)

⁴¹ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese* [1976], trans. & ed. by Henry Rosemont, Jr. and Daniel J. Cook; *Monographs of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy*, no. 4; (Honolulu, 1977), introduction 2-3, 8, 14-16 and 36-38 and text, esp. paragraph 2 (p. 57) and paragraphs 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21 (pp. 83-88). See also David E. Mungello, *Leibniz and Confucianism: The Search for Accord* (Honolulu, 1977), esp. 13-17 and 74-86.

called attention to the happy coincidence between politics and morality in China and intimated that Europe would profit if philosophers occupied thrones. Wolff himself elaborated on this theme, holding up China as the premier example of benevolent absolutism.⁴²

In 1737, a former student, Jean Deschamps (1709-1769), became almoner and royal tutor at the court of Frederick William I (r. 1711-1740), the monarch who had expelled Wolff from Halle. Deschamps introduced the crown prince to Wolff's writings and exercised what influence he could on Wolff's behalf. Soon after Frederick II (r. 1740-1786) acceded to the throne, Wolff was reinstated on the faculty at Halle and became Chancellor in 1743. French translations of his works were prepared for Frederick who had copies forwarded to Voltaire for his comments.⁴³ The writings, which urged benevolent rule after the manner of the Chinese emperors, were doubtless the source of certain sentiments expressed in Frederick's *Anti-Machiavel* (published in 1739) in which he called himself the first servant of the people with whose welfare he was charged. He also denounced wars of aggression, recommending instead that a ruler avoid hostilities whenever possible and endear himself to his subjects by "kindness, justice, and clemency." Little wonder that Voltaire, who lauded the treatise extravagantly, believed he had discovered a true philosopher-king!

The fact is that many intellectual leaders of the 17th and 18th centuries praised the enlightened beneficence of China's philosopher-kings without knowing much about them; but if a number of the accounts on which they based their suppositions were not totally reliable, their enthusiasm was seldom dampened. The Englishman John Webb (1611-1672) wrote an essay in 1669 in which he tried to persuade King Charles II of the advantages to be derived from imitating the ancient philosopher-kings of China; and the Dominican scholar, Domingo Fernandez Navarrete (1610-1689), notwithstanding the anti-Jesuit tone of his *Tratados históricos, políticos, éticos y religiosos de la Monarchia de China* (2 vols.; Rome, 1674), in a subsequent work recommended that European governments could well emulate the Chinese in several respects. Leibniz, whose Sinophilism has already been noted, took the opportunity while in Paris in 1675 to compliment Finance Minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683) on his sponsorship of scientific explorations and may have advised him to dispatch a mission to secure reliable information concerning China. In any event, Colbert was preparing for such an expedition when he

⁴² A lecture to this effect, delivered by Wolff in 1750, was published. A lengthy excerpt is available in Donald F. Lach, "The Sinophilism of Christian Wolff (1679-1754)," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 14, no. 4 (Oct. 1953), 568-70.

⁴³ For further information on Wolff, see *ibid.*, 561-74; Adolf Reichwein, *China and Europe: Intellectual and Artistic Contacts in the Eighteenth Century* (trans. J.C. Powell; New York, 1925), 84-87; and Leonard Krieger, *The German Idea of Freedom: History of a Political Tradition* (Boston, 1957), 66-70.

passed away in 1683. His son and successor did subsequently sponsor a small Jesuit mission to Peking.

As the 17th century drew to a close, China was brought more and more to the attention of Europe. In 1687, the *Confucius Sinarum philosophus* was produced—an incomplete translation of Confucius by Jesuit scholars—and was almost immediately retranslated into several vernacular tongues. François Bernier (1625-1688), who began preparing a complete French translation, was unable to finish it before his death; however, in his introduction, published in 1688, he lauded the Chinese emperors for their attention to the welfare of their subjects and urged European sovereigns to do the same. These works and others dealing with Chinese religious beliefs and economic and social observances—such as Father LeComte's account which was officially proscribed—were widely read. In one way or another, they exercised an influence on a number of prominent individuals including the economist Pierre Boisguilbert (1646-1714); Marshal Sébastien le Prestre de Vauban (1633-1707); social philosopher Charles Irénée Castel, Abbé de Saint-Pierre (1658-1743); Daniel Defoe (ca. 1660-1731); and Matthew Tindal (ca. 1655-1733). Of course, most European Sinophiles absorbed the uncritical accounts of Father Jean Baptiste DuHalde, especially his very readable and comprehensive *Description de l'Empire de la Chine* (1735). Conversant with it were such luminaries as Jean François Melon—who wrote a treatise on Chinese Commerce, published in 1734; François Marie Arouet de Voltaire (1694-1778); Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755); Jean Baptiste de Boyer, Marquis d'Argens (1704-71); Gabriel Bonnet de Mably (1709-85); the *Encyclopédistes*; Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78); Baron Friedrich Melchior Grimm (1723-1807); David Hume (1711-76); Oliver Goldsmith (1728-74); and William Warburton (1698-1779)—several drawing upon it for works of their own, though not always in a favorable manner. For example, Montesquieu, who read several laudatory accounts of China while preparing his *l'Esprit des lois* (1748), based his own ideas on the more critical reports of those engaged in the China trade, as his depiction of China as a despotic, fear-ridden state reveals. Less harsh, though far from uncritical, was Rousseau, who in his 1755 article on political economy for the *Encyclopédie*, commented favorably on China's tax policies and fiscal system. Elsewhere, however, in support of his thesis that science and art were inimical to good manners, he declared:

There is in Asia a vast country in which the sciences are a passport to the highest positions in the State. If the sciences really purified morals, . . . if they really inspired courage, then the people of China would assuredly be wise, free, and invincible. But as a matter of fact, there is no sin to which they are not prone, no crime which is not common amongst them. . . .⁴⁴

⁴⁴ As quoted in Reichwein, *op. cit.*, 94.

However, dissenting opinions of this nature were in the minority. The Marquis d'Argens and Oliver Goldsmith employed the device used in Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721) in having a foreign traveler—a Chinese—to comment on European society, institutions, and manners. More adulatory were Etienne de Silhouette's (1709-67) *La balance chinoise* (London, 1764) and the first volume of François Marie de Marsy's (1714-68) thirty-tome *Histoire moderne des Chinois, des Japannois, des Indiens, des Persans, des Turcs, des Russiens . . .* (Paris, 1755-78). From their books and those of DuHalde, one obtains a picture of a peaceful, prosperous, orderly land governed with fatherly tenderness by men of virtue and talent. Farmers, it was said, were held in high esteem—above merchants and artisans—and were granted privileges not enjoyed by other classes. Taxation was moderate and based upon a farmer's ability to pay. Those unable or unwilling to pay did not have their lands confiscated—lest the family be ruined—although they were subject to imprisonment. No taxes were imposed on goods moving from one sector of the country to another, and roads and canals facilitated a large and thriving domestic trade. Education was handled felicitously, enabling young men of ability to rise to positions of trust. Everything was ordered; nothing left to chance. "The state," wrote DuHalde, "has regulated all things, even the most minute—salutations, visits, banquets, and the letters that one writes."⁴⁵

These observations concerning agriculture and internal trade greatly interested Victor Riguetti, Marquis de Mirabeau (1715-89), François Quesnay (1694-1774), and other French physiocrats, who advocated free trade and a single tax on land. When Pierre Poivre (1719-86) returned from an extended stay in Asia and, in an address delivered in 1764 before the Academy of Lyons, proclaimed that China's prosperous economy quite properly rested on agriculture, the physiocrats were delighted, citing his statements as proof of their doctrines. Anne Robert Jacques Turgot (1727-81), who was intendant of Limoges at the time, also took note of Poivre's views. Though Turgot was never formally a physiocrat, he shared much of their ideology concerning political economy. Excited, though somewhat skeptical about the reports on China, he arranged to train two Chinese students to make accurate observations concerning science, agriculture, and industry. Before their return to China, they were given a list of fifty-two questions to which Turgot desired answers. Among other things, he wanted to know how many Chinese farmers owned their land and buildings, the number of employed workers, the number of merchants, the number living on interest from loans, the proportion of land being cultivated by owners (also by tenants and by slaves), whether landlords advanced money or furnished animals to their

⁴⁵ As quoted in Maverick, *op. cit.*, 30.

tenants, the going rate of interest on loans, types of crops, the amount of rice consumed *per capita*, the price of grain and whether it was sold by weight or by measure, daily wages for workingmen, methods by which land was taxed, whether farmers were free to sell their grain or to store it, techniques for paper-making and textile manufacturing, printing processes, tea growing and processing, specifics regarding materials used in the building trades, and types of soil, fossil formations, minerals, and clays. The questions represent a reasonable attempt to secure a precise, accurate description of the Chinese economy and demonstrate that China was of more than passing interest to a significant coterie of scholars and men of affairs.⁴⁶ Many of them were advocates of reform who frequently referred to information from China in support of their arguments.

Quesnay—personal physician to Mme de Pompadour, founder of the physiocrats, contributor to the *Encyclopédie*, and author of the *Tableau économique* (1758)—was interested in much more than economics. An avid reader, he had developed an enthusiasm for China—principally through Jacques Philibert Rousselot de Surgy's ten-volume *Mélanges intéressans et curieux, ou abrégé d'histoire naturelle, morale, civile, et politique de l'Asie, de l'Afrique, de l'Amérique, et des terres polaires* (10 vols.; Paris, 1763-65), which he freely plagiarized in his *Le despotisme de la Chine* (Paris, 1767), while embellishing it to suit his own philosophy. He believed that trade should be free from all unnatural impediments; therefore, tariff barriers should be swept away so that a completely natural commercial economy would prevail. He asserted that a *laissez faire* policy would increase efficiency in the distribution of goods and would encourage agricultural production by eliminating customs duties that all too often were passed on by the manufacturers and traders to the farmer. A single tax should be levied on land, the ultimate source of all wealth. Moreover, agricultural methods should be improved and prices allowed to seek their natural levels. Although commerce and industry were useful, they tended to be sterile and were unreliable bases for a nation's economic well-being. It may be that Quesnay's static view of industry and commerce was due in part to his admiration for China, though this is largely conjecture. It is quite certain that China's government captured his imagination; for he became an outspoken proponent of enlightened despotism on the Chinese model. He also praised the Chinese system of education, whereby young men were prepared for public service.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ More information and the entire list of Turgot's questions are published, *ibid.*, 45-58.

⁴⁷ Maverick's book mentioned above is really two books in one, the second being a translation of *Le despotisme de la Chine*. For other thoughts on this subject, see G. F. Hudson, *Europe and China: A Survey of Their Relations from the Earliest Times to 1800* (London, 1961), 322-25.

Remarkable agreement regarding many of the real or imagined features of Chinese polity, economics, or education may be observed among European Sinophiles, regardless of their nationality. An excellent example is Johann Heinrich Gottlieb von Justi (1720-71), German cameralist interested in numerous fields, whose career took him over much of Europe. While in Austrian service from 1750 to 1754, he proposed government subsidies for the production of silk as an export item and advocated abolition of serfdom and the onerous burdens imposed on the peasant class, contending that the liberated farmers would cause production to increase. From Vienna, Justi went to Leipzig for a year, to Göttingen for two, then briefly to Denmark, and finally to Prussia to supervise state mining enterprises. Justi published books and articles on numerous matters, most of them dealing with economics or politics and many of them revealing his familiarity with DuHalde's work on China. Very complimentary about China's government, he attributed its moderation to an educational system producing a competent scholar gentry and to the boards of ministers who, unlike single functionaries, were able to keep the ruler in check; if anything, he outdid DuHalde in eulogizing the Chinese system. China's civil service system and the government's concern for agriculture and the well-being of the populace were singled out for special praise. Justi heartily recommended institution of an examination system similar to that of China by enlightened Western monarchs and also the adoption of government grain storage programs, which, like China's, would provide security against years when harvests were poor.⁴⁸

A particularly appealing aspect of China for Justi, Voltaire, and most other Sinophiles was its rational system of ethics not dependent upon any belief in a personal God. The majority, like Voltaire, spoke in a deistic manner about China, alleging that its government was enlightened and stable and its people gentle, tractable, and tolerant because of a natural, nondoctrinaire religion. The Chinese, they postulated, believed in a Supreme Deity who had brought the universe into being and had established natural laws to sustain it. Moral law had been implanted in man's heart so that, by exercising his reason, he could discern and obey it.

On the other hand, there were thinkers like Diderot (1713-84), Condillac (1715-80), and sundry interpreters of John Locke (1632-1704), who rejected any innate moral ideas, opting instead for some

⁴⁸ Johanna M. Menzel, "The Sinophilism of J.H.G. Justi," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 17, no. 3 (June 1956), 300-10. Admiration for the Chinese examination system was particularly widespread among English intellectuals at this time. See Edmund Leites, "Confucianism in Eighteenth-Century England: Natural Morality and Social Reform," *Philosophy East and West*, 28, no. 2 (Apr. 1978), 143-159.

form of natural morality based on principles which could be empirically or sociologically ascertained and expressed in positive terms. Jean Meslier (1678-1733), Paul Henri Dietrich d'Holbach (1723-89), and many of the physiocrats were numbered among those who repudiated a deistic moral order in favor of a totally naturalistic one—an eternal and all-inclusive order requiring no Prime Mover, whose laws with respect to man were knowable through human experience. Rights and duties were inseparable—the former being guaranteed only by performance of the latter according to the dictates of nature. Moral truths applied only to man, the only self-conscious species in the natural order, who was capable of deriving ethical principles from the workings of the physical universe. He alone was competent to judge how human needs, relationships, and sensate experiences could be reconciled with the integral requirements of the physical order. Therefore, he must take care not to disturb or oppose nature because the welfare of society and his own personal happiness were contingent upon how its laws were observed.⁴⁹ Although the proponents of natural morality stressed the pursuit of self-interest and utilitarian motives in a manner seldom expressed by Chinese philosophers,⁵⁰ a general affinity with the Confucian-Taoist ethic was evident. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the vast majority of the Western enlighteners were favorably disposed toward a people who for centuries, they contended, had acted morally, without any inborn knowledge of God, purely on the strength of their humanistic ethical system.

Not infrequently, Western humanists compared Chinese humanitarianism and toleration to European attitudes and practices. Bayle, embittered by Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685), sardonically contrasted the broad-minded policy of the Chinese Emperor in allowing Jesuit missionaries to win converts in his

⁴⁹ Cf. Lester G. Crocker, *Nature and Culture: Ethical Thought in the French Enlightenment* (Baltimore, 1963), 45-51.

⁵⁰ The most notable exception is Mo Tzu (ca. 470-391 B.C.). For a brief introduction to his utilitarian ideas, see the editorial comments and the selections from the works of Mo Tzu in William Theodore de Bary, Wing-sit Chan, and Burton Watson (eds.), *Sources of Chinese Tradition (Introduction to Oriental Civilizations)*, ed. William Theodore de Bary; N.Y., 1960), 34-47, and *Basic Writings of Mo Tzu, Hsün Tzu, and Han Fei Tzu*, Bk. I, 1-129. By the same token, Hsün Tzu (ca. 312-221 B.C.) was probably the most rationalistic of the Confucian thinkers and, like the *philosophes*, wished to lay aside all "superstitions" and dependence upon supernatural powers while recognizing the human mind as the source of moral order and perfection (*ibid.*, Bk. II, 7-8). While a certain utilitarian strain may be observed in the thought of Han Fei Tzu (ca. 280-233 B.C.), his harsh legalism was forever discredited when the ill-fated Ch'in Dynasty (221-207 B.C.) tried to implement it by Draconian means (*ibid.*, Bk. III, 1-79). As a matter of fact, neither he nor Mo Tzu are in the mainstream of Confucian thought.

land to the “dogmatic spirit” of Rome.⁵¹ The more charitable Leibniz likewise lauded the Emperor’s edict of toleration and pressed on with his grandiose scheme to bring about worldwide religious concord.⁵² China appeared to provide an appropriate model for natural religion, and Voltaire was quick to observe that the Chinese had established a philosophic and tolerant “national cult,” dedicated to promoting virtue—a rational, deistic substitute for the “priest-ridden” religions of Europe. His apparent gullibility in accepting at face value the uncritical or embellished accounts of Jesuit missionaries involved in the rites controversy was not due to lack of reading; for he eagerly read scholarly, reliable works along with the biased. The fact is that in his eagerness to debunk revealed religion and to establish a rational substitute, he simply ignored information unsuited to his purpose.⁵³

Voltaire’s spirit was characteristic of the *philosophes* in general; for the scientific revolution and the philosophic currents accompanying it led to a liberal secularism and skepticism toward established creeds. Latitudinarianism within the Church of England fostered an aversion to dogma also observable among the deists, and the Freemasons and other secret societies avidly disseminated tolerant humanitarian sentiments tinged with anticlericalism.⁵⁴ One of them, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81), sought to find some common ground in revealed and natural religions and espoused universal toleration.

Humanistic sentiments of this type were also in vogue among the so-called “enlightened despots.” The Emperor Joseph II (r. 1765-90) issued his Edict of Toleration in 1781, and Frederick II also permitted religious toleration for utilitarian reasons, though in neither instance were all minorities fully free to worship as they pleased.

The *philosophes* applauded actions of this sort on the part of monarchs, but in most cases, it is impossible to know the extent of their influence, if any, upon royal edicts. Certainly they wanted to bring about changes in European society, though they went about it by circuitous means. Moreover, they were sufficiently conservative not to wish to overthrow existing governments or institutions; yet they fervently desired reforms and were willing to work for them in their own manner. It may be that Voltaire’s unwillingness to press for the installation of a legislative body on the order of England’s Parliament—which he admired—was due to a reluctance to alter the

⁵¹ A verbatim rendition of Bayle’s remarks is given in Pinot, *op. cit.*, 315.

⁵² For particulars concerning Leibniz’s attempts, see *ibid.*, 333-40; Donald F. Lach, “Leibniz and China,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 6, no. 4 (Oct. 1945), 436-55; and Reichwein, *op. cit.*, 79-83.

⁵³ See Arnold H. Rowbotham, “Voltaire Sinophile,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 47, no. 4 (Dec. 1932), 1056-65.

⁵⁴ See Davis, *op. cit.*, 100-102 & *passim*.

essential nature of the French monarchy by drastically restricting its authority.⁵⁵ At any rate, the Chinese model was ready at hand, so that Voltaire, like many of his intellectual contemporaries, sought to propagate the idea of a philosopher-king and magistrates imbued with enlightened principles, who would act to bring about reforms from above. In his historical works, especially in the *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756), the philosopher of Ferney compared in a favorable light China's achievements with those of other lands and praised its government:

The human mind may certainly not imagine a better government than that in which everything is decided by the great tribunals, subordinate to one another, whose members are admitted only after several stringent examinations. Everything in China is governed by these tribunals. Six sovereign courts are at the head of all the courts of the empire. The first superintends all the mandarins of the provinces; the second directs the finances; the third . . . the administration of rites, sciences, and arts; the fourth . . . the administration of war; the fifth presides in the jurisdictions charged with criminal affairs; the sixth has supervision of public works. The result of all the matters decided in these tribunals is borne to a supreme court. Under these tribunals there are forty-four subordinate ones in Peking. Each mandarin in his province is assisted by a tribunal. It is impossible under such an administration for the emperor to exercise an arbitrary power. The general laws emanate from him; but through the constitution of the government, nothing can be done without having to consult some men trained in law and chosen by votes. That one prostrates himself before the emperor as before a god, that the least lack of respect to his person is punished according to law as a sacrilege, certainly does not prove a despotic and arbitrary government. Despotic government would be that in which the prince without infringement of the law, would be able to deprive a citizen of his property or life without . . . any other reason than he wished to do it. Now if there has ever been a state in which the life, honor and welfare of men has been protected by laws, it is the empire of China.⁵⁶

Voltaire's play *L'Orphelin de la Chine* (1755), which he termed "the morals of Confucius in five acts," was an answer to Rousseau's contention that art and science were injurious to morals. Adapted from a Chinese drama, it portrayed in dramatic form the triumph of the cultured and civilized Chinese over the barbaric hordes of Genghis Khan. Confucius was exalted as the "archetype of the eighteenth-century rationalist" and potential preceptor of the world; for Confucian morals presented a sensible and practical alternative to the narrow and intolerant dogmas of the West.⁵⁷

Voltaire's techniques were those of the propagandist, a fact equally true of the *philosophes* as a whole. Prudence required that the

⁵⁵ The thought is Rowbotham's. See Rowbotham, *op. cit.*, 1056.

⁵⁶ *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations in Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Paris, 1878), XIII, chap. CXCIV, 462-63.

⁵⁷ Cf. Reichwein, *op. cit.*, 87-92 and Edwardes, *op. cit.*, 105-06.

means of educating rulers, magistrates, and prominent individuals in enlightened principles not be too direct. By extolling the beneficence of Chinese rulers and by expounding upon tax policies, religious toleration, examinations for prospective government administrators, moderate penal practices, encouragement of farming or any other policies deemed worthy of exposition, the *philosophes* hoped to instill their ideals in the top echelons of society.

Toward the end of the century, Sinophilism began to decline, and its demise came in the wake of the French Revolution. Therefore, a question arises as to whether the relationship between China and the West in the 17th and 18th centuries and the resulting knowledge or image of China in the West had any lasting effect upon the European Enlightenment. Almost certainly it did; yet the degree of the influence is as difficult to measure as to stem the flow of the tides. Let it be remembered, however, that Sinophilism was not a phenomenon restricted to one particular country in Europe. It was widespread and dynamic, if only in a transient fashion, and it left a residue of cultural and intellectual influences assimilated by the West so completely that their presence is seldom discerned. For example, deism as a natural system of religion and ethics was a passing trend; yet its effects are still very much in evidence in the religious, legal, and intellectual realms.

In the area of government, there are many concepts—enlightened absolutism for one—that, in most Western nations, are no longer treated as viable alternatives. Nevertheless, the idea that government should benevolently oversee the well-being of citizens, even to the extent of promulgating directives and regulations for their benefit or protection, is still very much alive.

Conversely, the Chinese educational system lauded so highly by 18th-century Sinophiles has left little philosophical residue but a very important practical derivation: the system of civil service examinations adopted by Western nations in the 19th and 20th centuries. The fact is that 18th-century thinkers had an imperfect conception of the Chinese educational system, but that did not deter them from alluding to it in an effort to institute educational innovations or reforms that they deemed necessary or desirable. It seems unlikely, however, that they would have found the Chinese system, with its great stress upon memorizing the Confucian classics, compatible with their own utilitarian ideologies; for they did not accord their own classics the same reverence conferred upon them in the past. To be sure, most of the *philosophes* had drunk deeply, during their formative years, from the classics, and they rendered perfunctory praise to the writers of Greek and Roman times and expressions of appreciation for classical practitioners of the Renaissance. It is also true that Stoic and Epicurean thought was selectively refurbished and incorporated into the

order of the age, while Aristotelian order, form, precision, and balance continued to reign in French literary and dramatic circles. However, the authority of the ancients had been eroded by Newtonian physics and the quarrel between the ancients and moderns, so that Bernard de Bovier de Fontenelle (1657-1757), and ultimately the majority of the French *philosophes*, became convinced of the practical limitations of classical thought. Furthermore, having imbibed the intoxicating elixir of contemporary philosophy, they tended to accord the ancients the sort of patronizing respect reserved for museum pieces. The enlighteners might cite classical works and honor pagan writers to disparage church doctrine or to deprecate ecclesiastical narrow-mindedness, but they did not seriously enlist them in the cause of ushering in societal changes promising to insure human happiness and well-being. They spoke the language of rationalism and empiricism (not simply that of the classics) and they wished to achieve utilitarian ends. Always impatient with delay, they would have found the Confucian course of self-cultivation too slow for their purposes. It was no longer the age of Bossuet, Fénelon, or even La Rochefoucauld and his *Maximes*. Confucius was admired for his wisdom, but the Chinese system of education would have been given short shrift in the West.

On the other hand, the economic impact of China on the West may be greater than has generally been supposed. Aside from the question of trade relations between East and West whose effects have been frequently mentioned, consider the effects of *laissez faire* economics, noticeable principally in the 19th century but discernible even today—concepts which can be traced back through Adam Smith and the physiocrats to China. There can be little doubt that China was Quesnay's model. His students openly attested to that fact, and the affinity between his economic thought and what he conceived was being practiced in China is irrefutable.⁵⁸ Moreover, it is doubtful that he could have enunciated a doctrine that completely subordinated industry and commerce (which were growing rapidly in the West) to agriculture had he not adopted the Chinese model. In the light of this, the influence of China upon Western *laissez-faire* economics is doubtless greater than generally supposed, when it is recognized at all.

In the interrelated realms of religion and ethics, there is no doubt that deism was fostered by the Newtonian revolution, which prompted a search for natural laws that would apply in every field of human endeavor. Let it be recalled, however, that China provided the only living prototype of deistic ethics known to 18th-century thinkers—Utopian speculation did not suffice—and the affinity between the Sinophiles and leading deists is too great to dismiss lightly.

⁵⁸ See Maverick, *op. cit.* (See note 29 above.)

As for the ethics of natural religion, a question remains as to whether the enlighteners' move toward a relativistic and utilitarian basis for public morals was prompted or hastened by the influx of Oriental philosophy and the concomitant contention by European freethinkers that a superior system of conduct could be formulated without religious sanctions. Ostensibly there was a causal relationship; yet the influence of Neo-Confucianism cannot be precisely ascertained or measured. After all, the antipathy that the *philosophes* manifested toward institutional religion was not the product of foreign ideologies, but of forces at work within Western society itself. Citing the Chinese example was simply a ploy used by the *philosophes* to lend cogency to their arguments. Had it not been employed, other examples would have been dredged up; for the *philosophes* were determined to crush all institutional religion (*écrasez l'infâme*), which to them kept the minds of men in bondage. It may be noted that there were no serious proposals to install Confucian ethics in Europe. Voltaire might praise the Confucian way in contrast to *l'infâme*, but he would go no further. A Confucian system of ethics would no doubt have proved inimical to Western empiricism and just as restrictive as the precepts of institutionalized religion. This, the *philosophes* did not want. Though they shared the humanitarian and tolerant sentiments reflected in Confucian thought, they would have found the Confucian exhortation to filial piety to be a laudable but quaint and overly simplistic concept—perhaps worthy of emulation, but hardly of sufficient importance to be assigned top priority.

With pride rather than Confucian humility of spirit, the *philosophes* apotheosized human reason and propagated their “enlightened” views, confident that they could thereby usher in a better society for the good of mankind. Espousing *sensibilité* and genuinely concerned about eradicating injustice and promoting liberty, fraternity, and equality for all, they, nevertheless, approached their enunciated goals rationally on the basis of their own secular system of ethics and morality. While some of them might recognize that, for the commonweal, the teachings of Jesus Christ could be useful in deterring crime and degradation among the masses, scriptural injunctions were seen as *passées* or unnecessary for those like themselves of superior intellect and “enlightened” views who were perfectly capable of conducting themselves according to their own lights. Indeed, had not the church for centuries employed scriptural admonitions to shackle men's minds, to command the obedience of the faithful, and to uphold a reprehensible, authoritarian system guilty of obstructing human progress? Why then should men of good will wish to espouse beliefs that might offer the church an opportunity for dominance? Biblical teachings concerning personal relationships—honoring one's father and mother, the sanctity of marriage, treating one's neighbor as

oneself, and loving one's enemies—were not necessarily denied, neither were they always heeded; for men determined to transform society have little time to ponder them, much less to propagate them. In pursuit of their grandiose goal, the deistic enlighteners deemed a natural system of ethics to be sufficient and more suitable than Christian precepts; therefore, they failed to maintain intact the personal relationships stressed in Holy Writ and also in the Chinese classics. The Confucian system of ethics was based upon filial piety—a purely humanistic principle like those of the *philosophes*; but, unlike their rational axioms, Confucianism stressed preservation of intimate family relationships rather than the transformation of society. By looking for quick and immediately observable results, the enlighteners emphasized individual rights rather than duties and, perhaps somewhat inadvertently, spawned discontent, disrespect for authority, and an emphasis upon adversary relationships that have contributed to revolutions and continue to poison political, social, and economic relationships down to the present time.

Neo-Confucianism can in no way be held accountable for these occurrences. The Western humanists made their own choices. They failed to provide nourishment for the inner man, rejecting the only indigenous system—Judeo-Christianity—that, like Confucianism, emphasized inner spirituality. Their reasons for doing so are understandable; for institutional religion had all too often tried to impose its dogmas to the detriment of free inquiry. Much needed to be purged. Unhappily, however, the *philosophes* proceeded to “throw out the baby with the bath water” with their lopsided, indeed virtually exclusive emphasis upon rational and empirical methodology and their supreme confidence in relativistic natural law. In effect, they borrowed examples from Chinese philosophy and society to bolster their arguments, while they ignored elements of Oriental thought or experience unsuited to their purposes. Still, the Chinese influence cannot be denied; for if the effect was not foundational, it was at the very least that of a catalyst deposited in the test tube of Western intellectual ferment.

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