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The Battle over Confucius and Classical Chinese Philosophy in European Early Enlightenment Thought (1670–1730)

Abstract A profound split is evident during the period 1670–1730 in the way European scholars and commentators attempted to understand and describe classical Chinese thought. For some, Confucianism acknowledged divine creation and divine governance of the world, immortality of the soul and other elements of Natural Theology. The Radical Enlightenment thinkers, however, and also some Christian scholars denied that Confucianism was based on Natural Theology or pervaded by belief in divine providence, characterizing it rather as monist, naturalist and Spinozist. The disagreement proved fundamental in several respects and proved divisive for the Church, as well as European thought more generally, producing a series of lively disputes that continued over several decades.

Keywords Radical Enlightenment, Confucianism, atheism, naturalism, Spinozism, monism, Jesuits, creation, divine providence, Natural Theology

During the Enlightenment era in the West—covering the period 1650–1800—many European thinkers and writers adopted a positive, appreciative view of Chinese society and politics and of classical Chinese philosophy in particular. This is especially true of the more irreligious and subversive strand within European Enlightenment thought. Indeed, it became a pronounced tendency among those figures committed to securing sweeping changes in European society, changes between rulers and ruled, religious authority and laity, and between aristocracy and the common people. Although there was also a tendency for estimations of China and Chinese thought to become less positive in the later eighteenth century, down to 1750 or so, the European Enlightenment’s more radical wing remained uniformly positive in its view of Chinese society, culture and philosophy. The aim of this article is to
explain the reasons for this high appreciation of Confucianism among radical-minded European writers of the period and demonstrate the doctrinal difficulties this created for defenders of Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant.

European enthusiasm for classical Chinese thought originated during the third quarter of the seventeenth century, among a small group of libertine Deist Neo-Epicureans. The first freethinker, or “suspected atheist,” as the leading German Lutheran érudit Jakob Friedrich Reimmann (1668–1743) calls him, using Chinese culture systematically as a subversive instrument within western intellectual debate, was the Dutch scholar Isaac Vossius (1618–89) (Reimmann 1725, 480–81). In the late 1650s, Vossius stressed the vast antiquity of Chinese institutions and ancient origins of Chinese philosophy to undermine confidence in Biblical chronology and the centrality of Christian Revelation. Also based on the exceptional antiquity of Chinese civilization was Vossius’ and the English deist Charles Blount’s thesis that the Biblical Flood engulfed not the whole inhabited world but only a restricted part, mainly the land inhabited by the Jews (King 1698, 21, 24; Bayle 1704–07, IV, 65; Lai 1998, 138–39). Vossius’ numerous detractors denounced his arguments, especially his ardent eulogizing of Chinese thought, morality and culture, despite his knowing no Chinese, or having ever been to China. His insistence on Chinese thought and culture being one of humanity’s supreme achievements according to his critics exalted Chinese accomplishment out of all proportion to its real value (Heumann 1720, 1715–27, XI, 717–20, 774, 778).

Chinese society, contended Vossius, in his Variarum Observationum Liber, his chief contribution to radical thought, was not only the oldest but also the most praiseworthy section of civilized humanity if one measures men’s achievements in terms of peace, equity, harmonious living, stability and cultivation of the arts and sciences, as philosophers and scholars should do (Vossius 1685, 56–57, 77; Reimmann 1741, 47; Gründliche Auszüge 1741, 406). He extolled in particular Chinese science, technology and medicine. Among other points, he stressed that it was the Chinese, not the Europeans, who invented printing. They had done so, moreover, 1,500 years before the West (Vossius 1685, 59, 75–76, 81). The reason for their conspicuous success, he maintained, was that they had come nearer to achieving a “Platonic republic,” with freedom of inquiry and criticism, than others. They had entrusted the most vital matters to “philosophers and lovers of philosophy” instead of the hereditary nobility. “The philosophers enjoy such great freedom” to express their views that whenever China’s rulers err, the philosophers may criticize and guide them to an extent “scarcely even found among the Israelite prophets” (Vossius 1685, 58–59; Hazard 1964, 36).

Other early enthusiasts for China’s social and cultural achievements included the French freethinker Charles de Saint-Évremond (1613–1703) and the English
diplomat Sir William Temple (1628–99). Interestingly, Vossius, Saint-Évremond and Temple all knew each other and, in the later 1660s, lived and worked for a time in the same place—The Hague—in Holland. There they were virtual neighbours and all three had contact, in addition, with the great philosopher, Spinoza. These eminent commentators were used to viewing the society, religion and politics of Christian Europe of their time very much in a critical light. Perhaps no-one ever thought “so profoundly and solidly” as Saint-Évremond, remarked the subversive French author, Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d’Argens (1703–71), several decades later (d’Argens 1743, 43). Indeed, Saint-Évremond remained a role model for many a European nobleman of “advanced” views. After the publication of the famous Dictionnaire historique et critique of Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), at Rotterdam, in 1697, he boldly and uncompromisingly took Bayle’s side when orthodox scholars, Catholic and Protestant alike, denounced its impiety and scholarly “lies” concerning China (Zoli 1990, 467). Temple was denigrated as an “atheist” by his foes, but praised by Dutch freethinking friends as a wise republican “who loved Holland as if it was his own country, because it was free” (Monk 1963, viii). Temple sympathized with Saint-Évremond’s enthusiasm for Epicurean moral philosophy and pursuit of calm enjoyment of life and philosophical peace of mind.

A true cosmopolitan, much influenced by Italian and French skeptics, libertines, and republicans, like Montaigne, Bocaccio, Machiavelli and “Padre Paolo” (i.e., Sarpi), Temple greatly admired what he had learned of China and especially Confucius, “the most learned, wise and virtuous of all the Chineses” (Temple 1963, 65, 113). In his opinion there was no better inspiration for organizing one’s life than the wisdom of Confucius. Temple, like Vossius and Saint-Évremond, was impressed especially by the close parallelism between philosophical insight based on reason and the practical ordering of human life and politics on earth. Confucius’ “chief principle,” observed Temple, was that everyone should “study and endeavour the improving and perfecting of his own natural reason to the greatest height he is capable, so as he may never (or as seldom as can be) err and deviate from the law of nature in the course and conduct of his life.” He was convinced that “in this perfection of natural reason consists the perfection of body and mind and the utmost or supreme happiness of mankind” (Temple 1963, 113–14; Mungello 1998, 90; Israel 2001, 606). The naturalism of these freethinkers and their eulogizing Confucianism for focusing on the stability and well-being of society, and the need to harmonize the individual with nature, instead of on austere forms of piety aimed at redemption of individual “souls” in the hereafter, prompted Reimmann to comment scornfully—echoing earlier remarks by the prominent German Lutheran professor, Johann Franz Budde (1667–1729), about “Spinozism before Spinoza”—“fuisse in China Epicureanism ante Epicurum et post Epicurum” (in China
there was Epicureanism both before and after Epicurus) (Reimmann 1741, 9; Weststeijn 2007, 557).

Admiration of Chinese philosophy and culture, in this way, became an integral strand of the European Radical Enlightenment. Expressing similar opinions about China and Confucianism to those of Vossius, Temple, and Saint-Évremond were Boulainvilliers, d’Argens, Fréret, Simon Tyssot de Patot (1655–1738), the French scientist Jean-Jacques Dorthous de Mairan (1678–1771), the Italian radical Alberto Radicati di Passerano (1698–1737), and also Jean-Frédéric Bernard and Antoine-Augustin Bruzen de la Martinière (1662–1746), two of the chief contributors to the world’s first real encyclopedia of religion, the Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde (7 vols., Amsterdam, 1723–37). Edited and published by Jean-Frédéric Bernard (Le Clerc, 1683–1744), this work became widely known in Europe, appearing in Dutch, German and English besides French, and providing a strikingly positive account of China and its religious practices in which the culture of the Chinese scholars or Literati once again resembled “Spinozism” (Hunt, Jacob and Mijnhardt 2010, 239). The French aristocrat, Spinozist and republican, Henri, comte de Boulainvilliers (1659–1722), the first translator of Spinoza’s Ethics into French, was another radical enlightener who, like Bayle, identified Confucius with Spinoza and Confucianism with Spinozism (Benítez 1996, 405). Confucius’ followers, affirmed Radicati, “have precepts which contain most excellent morals, with very sublime ideas of that Supreme Power which gives life and motion to created beings” (Radicati di Passerano 1737, 36). Especially appealing to Bruzen de la Martinière, as several other radical writers, was that Confucius’ China was a meritocracy rather than a land governed by autocracy or nobility (Bruzen de la Martinière 1723, I, 586–87). During the early and mid-eighteenth century, many European enlighteners of a radical bent believed the absence of hereditary aristocracy in China since ancient times—and Chinese reliance on merit and training in philosophy as criteria for choosing administrators, judges and district governors—irrefutably proved the inherent superiority of the Chinese model. China had early on developed techniques to organize the recruitment and advancement of officials and administrators to govern the empire on the basis of merit, ability, honesty and philosophical knowledge rather than noble lineage or ecclesiastical authority.

Confucius’ philosophy was conceived by European freethinkers as a moral and political system which had positively shaped China for millennia and was potentially a model for all mankind. Their perspective was deeply problematic from a Christian standpoint, however, owing to its subversive implications for attitudes to government, religious authority, the existing social order, individual morality and education. With the publication in Latin, in 1687, of several translated classical Confucian texts under the title Confucius Sinarum
Philosophus, sive scientia sinensis latine exposita (Confucius Philosopher of the Chinese, or Chinese Science Expounded in Latin), a group of Jesuits, headed by Father Philippe Couplet (1623–93), utilizing the long-standing Jesuit practice of intermingling Confucian and Christian terms, concepts, and rituals in their missions in China, sought to show that Confucianism is not in fact “atheistic” [after all] (Pinot 1932, 151–52, 158, 418; Lai 1985, 163; Israel 2006, 642–43, 651). Their aim was to demonstrate that theism and belief in divine Providence characterized Confucianism just as much as did Chinese philosophy’s venerable antiquity and reasonableness (Kors 1990, 163; Elisseeff-Poisle 1978, 52). The Confucius Sinarum Philosophus held that Confucius’ teaching centered around the idea of a providential God, his terms Tian 天 and Shangdi 上帝 designating the Divinity and not the whole universe, as those who equated Confucianism with “atheism” contended. Not everyone was convinced. Some Christian writers worried that the Jesuits might have embellished Confucius’ thought in some degree with interpolations of their own and hence overly “spiritualized” and Christianized the classical thought of the Chinese (Le Clerc 1686–93, VII, 455; Pinot 1932, 152).

To the Jesuits, modern Chinese philosophical “atheism” was something real, but not authentically, Confucian. To style classical Confucians “atheists,” warned Couplet, when nearly all commentators agreed that Confucius had been outstandingly wise and virtuous, must have serious consequences for Christianity and European thought: for this would mean that “virtuous atheists” exist, that virtue and piety are distinct, and that Bayle was right to maintain that denying God can co-exist with moral uprightness (Kors 1990, 164). Thus, Couplet, while conceding Neo-Confucianism was “atheistic,” insisted Confucius and his immediate successors were not. For centuries prior to Moses and Christ, he maintained, the Chinese possessed genuine knowledge of “the true God” and true morality, even if they had taken this from nature and tradition (to him an ultimately less valid way) rather than divine revelation. Unlike ancient Greece and Rome, where a mere handful of philosophers had perceived the truths of monotheism and morality, while most men, supposedly, remained plunged in idolatrous superstition, among the Chinese, held another leading Jesuit missionary, Louis Le Comte (1655–1728), “prisca theologia” (venerable theology) had always prevailed, shaping the people’s religious traditions and culture and helping them resist atheism, immorality, unreasoning credulity and idolatry (Kors 1990, 169–70; Harrison 1990, 138).

Classifying the rich and complex philosophical tradition of China in terms of their own theological and philosophical traditions was bound to create serious intellectual difficulties. Besides antagonism between the freethinkers and Christians, there was inevitably a deep rift among those committed to converting the Chinese to Christianity. Among those striving to articulate a clear Catholic
viewpoint (after studying the translations of Confucius) was the French Jansenist Cartesian, Antoine Arnauld (1612–94). Being no friend of the Jesuits, he preferred the counter-arguments of Catholic opponents critical of Couplet and Le Comte. The ancient Confucians, contended Arnauld, knew no “spiritual substance” distinguished from mere matter and, consequently, were pure naturalists: They possessed nothing remotely akin to what he considered a correct notion of God, or spirituality, “ni des anges, ni de notre âme” (nor of angels or our soul) (Basnage de Beauval, 1692, 94–99; Leibniz 1768, IV, 82).

A great European controversy developed around the problem of China and Confucianism at the end of the seventeenth and during the early eighteenth century in which Bayle, here as in so many instances, played a central role. The full extent of the philosophical predicament created by the debate about China emerged only with his arguments about the moral feasibility of an atheistic society (Zoli 1989, 206–09; Zoli 1990, 468, 471). Towards the end of his life, in the Continuation des Pensées Diverses (1705) and the Réponse aux Questions d’un Provincial (1706), the “philosopher of Rotterdam” developed his deliberately perplexing and, for Europeans, deeply disorientating, thesis that classical Chinese thinkers conceived the beauty, symmetry, and order of the universe to be “the achievement and work” not of a Creator God but “of an unknowing nature.” He termed the Chinese thinkers “atheists” who were nevertheless outstanding for their achievement in moral thought and who contended that human happiness and social stability depend entirely on a well-grounded morality (Crousaz 1733, 410–11, 675; Spink 1960, 263–64, 352; Lai 1985, 153; Israel 2007, 12–13). While classifying classical Chinese philosophy a form of irreligious Spinozistic monism, Bayle at the same time, critics noted indignantly, agreed with the Jesuit missionaries in China that Confucianism splendidly upholds “le bien public” (the public good) on the basis of the highest and most praiseworthy moral and political values (Crousaz 1733, 438, 689; Cantelli 1969, 263; Weststeijn, 2007, 551–52). Most deplorable and worrying to both Catholics and Protestants in Bayle’s approach was his interpreting Confucianism not as an undeveloped, virtual or primitive atheism, an athéisme négatif like that (supposedly) of the Caribs, but a philosophically sophisticated “athéisme positif” (positive atheism). Confucius and Mencius, according to Bayle, judged all metaphysics infused with the idea of a Creator God to be philosophically inferior to “the opposed system” equating Nature with God as Spinoza does (Bayle 1705, II, 728–29; Bayle 1704–07, IV, 139–41).

Growing even more provocative in his late works, Bayle deliberately equated “les Spinozistes et les Lettrez de la Chine” (Spinozists with the Chinese Scholars), both, he says, being as knowledgeable as the most “pious” men of other nations about morality, equity, and all the forms of good and goodness in human society (Bayle 1704–07, IV, 434; Bayle 1705, I, 68–69, 73, 134–35). The
disturbing implications were heightened by Bayle’s claim that China was not the sole focus of Spinozistic sentiment in East Asia; “Spinoza’s atheism” he designated (as previously in the *Dictionnaire*) the “dogma of several sects in Asia” (Bayle 1705, I, 68; Lai 1998, 154). In his long article “Spinoza,” Bayle argues that Missionaries’ and travellers’ reports show Confucianism was only one particular way of expounding a set of doctrines widely diffused in the Far East (Bayle 1983, 35). The later French freethinker Jean Lévesque de Burigny (1692–1785), clearly following Bayle, agreed, in 1724, that if the Chinese “have their Spinozists who are very numerous and whose principle is that everything is one,” holding that the universe “is composed only of a single substance,” the Japanese too, it must be admitted, “are not far removed from the system Spinoza attempted to promote” (Lévesque de Burigny 1724, I, 17–21).

The astounding feature of this convoluted debate about Chinese philosophy and cults is that precisely the same argument styling the classical Confucianists “atheistic” virtual *Spinosistes* was advanced by leading representatives of both those eulogizing and, for religious reasons, those disparaging China. An identical argument served two diametrically opposed philosophical strategies—a juxtaposition that continued to characterize European controversies surrounding China and the Chinese for over half a century. Where the anti-Jesuit moderate mainstream Christian Enlightenment using this analogy tried to discredit China and the Chinese (as well as the Jesuits) by linking China with Spinozism, radical enlighteners strove to show that naturalistic monism was not just an ancient mode of thought but also a pre-eminently “natural” approach which, however vilified by churchmen, potentially—or even, perhaps, actually—was the principal way of thinking among most of mankind and the best scholars. Thus, André-François Boureau-Deslandes (1690–1757), in his *Histoire critique de la philosophie* of 1737, echoing Bayle’s idea that “most eastern nations adhere to the same viewpoint (as Spinoza),” drew a close parallel between Confucianism and Strato, the ancient Greek philosopher Bayle considered the closest ancient Greek parallel to Spinoza (Boureau-Deslandes 1737, II, 296–98; Vernière 1982, 352–53). d’Argens, in his *Lettres Chinoises, ou Correspondance philosophique, historique et critique* has his “Chinese visitor” in Paris observe, in a letter to Beijing that many Europeans admired, a philosopher whose thought closely resembled that of the Confucian literati (scholars), a Dutch thinker named “Spinoza” who was the originator of naturalism in Europe or possibly just its “restaurateur” since his key concepts resembled those of several ancient philosophers (Vernière 1982, 353; d’Argens 1739–40, I, 106; Israel 2001, 588).

Alleged parallels between Confucius and Spinoza were also employed by freethinkers and some Christian critics of the Jesuits to prove theological attacks on Spinozism as “atheistic” and immoral constituted a philosophically insufficient and unsuitable method of countering systematic naturalism and
“impiety.” Christian scholars, affirmed the Abbé François-André Pluquet (1716–90), in the mid-1750s, needed to do more than just denounce Spinoza for his “atheism” and opposition to Christian teaching. Claiming Spinoza overthrows all received ideas “on the nature of God, and undermines all the foundations of morality” could, suggested Pluquet, have very little impact in China or India since their philosophers consider the “revolting conclusions” one finds in Spinoza to be “des vérités ordinaires” (commonplace truths). Had Bayle published his *Dictionnaire* refutation of Spinoza at Beijing, suggested Pluquet, he would be dismissed as “un philosophe mediocre” (mediocre thinker) merely echoing popular notions and prejudice (Pluquet 1757, II, iv). In this way, debating classical Chinese thought in Europe rapidly evolved into a theological-philosophical maze of extraordinary complexity and wide resonance (Lai 1985, 151; Mungello 1980, 561–63; Mungello 1998, 98).

In his *Continuation*, adding detail to his earlier account, Bayle distinguishes four different schools of classical Chinese philosophy claiming they all conceived reality, with relatively minor variations, as a unified structure governed by a single set of rules, and as one or another form of monistic one-substance doctrine. This expanded his earlier argument, in the *Dictionnaire*, that while Spinoza was an original synthesizer, the “basis of his teaching he held in common” with various other philosophers ancient and modern, western and oriental (Bayle 1983, 29). Classical Chinese philosophy, especially Confucian thought, Bayle depicts as an “atheistic” Spinozistic system which acknowledges nothing in nature except nature itself, its driving force and shaping factor being the principle of movement and rest—the unknowing principle ordering the “different parts of the universe and that causes all the changes we notice” (Bayle 1705, II, 537–40, 728–30; Crousaz 1733, 41, 438, 675; Davis 1983, 534).

Not only did this imply ancient Chinese society was atheistic and formed a wholly admirable moral order but even that its moral order was demonstrably superior, in practice, to that of Christendom (Crousaz 1733, 689–91; Zoli 1989, 226, 232). These conclusions were clearly designed to bolster Bayle’s thesis, first formulated in his *Pensées Diverses* (Rotterdam, 1683), that moral decadence is not caused by incredulity and unbelief, and religion not a brake “capable de retenir nos passions” (capable of restraining our passions) (Bayle 1994, I, 72, 86). Furthermore, where, in the *Dictionnaire*, in 1697, Bayle ostensibly disparages Chinese “atheistic” ideas as “extravagant” concepts so “full of absurd contradictions”—despite swaying vast numbers of people of diverse cultural backgrounds in East Asia—that it is hard to understand how anyone can subscribe to them, in the *Continuation*, even this pretense of deferring to conventional views is discarded. Rather, in his last writings, Bayle highlights the uprightness and rational coherence of this overarching naturalist construct, aligning both Confucianism and Spinozism with Stratonism, the philosophy he
judges logically the most consistent of the ancient Greek systems of “atheism” (Bayle 1705, I, 134–35; II, 540, 729). Consequently, the difficulty Christian missionaries in China experienced in locating weak points in Confucianism he deemed identical to that European philosophers encountered when attempting to refute “Statronism” (Bayle 1705, II, 553–54). He does not know, Bayle confesses, how to defeat either Stratonism or Confucianism. But he presumed Cartesianism, owing to its basic dualism, offered the best chance of denying movement can be inherent in matter and hence of achieving “victory” over Spinozism-Confucianism.

Confucianism, then, for Bayle, like his contemporary, French philosopher Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715), possessed a purely immanent, rational structure grounded in nature rather than any transcendental realm, and conceived Nature as the totality of what is and the exclusive source of its own laws and principles (Pinot 1932, 314–27, 332; Lai 1985, 167). This radical construct was again taken up some years later by the English freethinker Anthony Collins (1676–1729), a follower of Bayle and Spinoza in key respects, who similarly equates the “Literati of China” with Strato and Xenophanes and their ideas with Spinozism (Collins 1708, 89; Zoli 1989, 227; Israel 2001, 617). While in the West it was doubtless easier to praise the morality of virtuous “atheists” —whether “Spinozist” or Confucian—than to defend the coherence and logicality of their metaphysics, it clearly emerges, contrary to what is sometimes suggested (Lai 1985, 177), that Collins, like Bayle, asserted both the moral superiority of Chinese (and Japanese) thought and its superior logicality and coherence.

To escape the trap of “atheism” tied to moral uprightness into which Bayle and Collins so deftly cast them, theologians and “moderate” enlightened writers either had to demonstrate that the classical Chinese were “atheists” and lacked moral uprightness or, alternatively, that they were “virtuous” but not “atheists” (Lai 1985, 167; Kors 1990, 171–75). After years of bitter wrangling and strenuous maneuvering among the theologians in Rome, it was the first—atheism without moral integrity—that the Vatican chose to endorse and the priscia theologia thesis of the Jesuits—asserting theism with moral integrity—that the Church formally condemned. Accordingly, the doctrine that “Li” as formulated in classical Chinese thought was derived from priscia theologia and is thus a memory, notion or premonition of the providential God of the Christians, the thesis upheld by the Jesuit Confucionists, as Arnauld called them, was roundly condemned as “error” by Paris’ Sorbonne University in the year 1700 (Charnley 1998, 22; Zoli 1989, 208, 211).

Banning Jesuit Confucioniste theses, it soon transpired, though, was more fraught with philosophical pitfalls and risk for the Church than the cardinals at Rome had supposed. For by rejecting the arguments of the Jesuit missionaries in
China, and pronouncing Chinese thought essentially “atheistic,” the cardinals not only risked undermining decades of Jesuit missionary endeavour in China but furthermore wrecked the hitherto widely prevailing European argument for the existence of God derived from the principle of “consensus gentium” (consent of the peoples). Overturning the Jesuit view meant refusing the doctrine, upheld by many Protestant and Catholic theologians at the time, that all peoples acknowledge God in one way or another and implied that much of the world’s population was in fact “atheistic” and Spinozistic, confirming Bayle’s claim that an ancient social code and system of ethics widely judged admirable had been devoutly upheld for many centuries independently of religion by “atheists.” Thus, the papacy found itself entangled in Bayle’s paradox that a well-ordered society of atheists is possible. Officially, the Church was obliged to argue henceforth that while the Chinese Emperor, mandarins and scholars were Confucianists, and hence “atheists,” the Chinese common people undoubtedly were not: the multitude supposedly adhered to praiseworthy moral standards, largely because they remained loyal to a deistic religion, even if a false one (Bergier 1769, II, 299).

Plainly, this was a precarious solution. But it seemed better than the alternative. Had the cardinals decided Chinese natural religion does provide a true conception of a providential God and His commandments and supports a moral order equal or superior to that of the West, they would have rendered it wholly unclear why Revelation, Christian theology and ecclesiastical authority are required for Man’s redemption and society’s well-being. With Papacy, Sorbonne and theologians all caught up in these intricacies; whilst in China, the Jesuits mostly persisted, nonetheless, with their argument from prisca theologia, postulating an austere, quasi-Christian pristine moral order, God’s original revelation to man, delivered not by reason, but by a supreme lawgiver and teacher appointed by God to instruct humanity. For them, classical Chinese thought was not atheistic but a true stepping-stone to Christianity. One finds in the authentic Chinese classics, they maintained, an acknowledged providential God and explicit notions of Heaven, Hell, the Fall, the Saviour, Redemption, fallen angels and the Immaculate Conception. Allusions to Christ featured integrally in early Chinese thought (Ehrard 1981, 428; Spence 1988, 75–76, 108–9). This fitted with their idea of the universal presence of the Christian “mysteries” and the submerged, coded embodiment of Christian truth supposedly found everywhere in symbols, words and ancient myths. Over many decades, the concept of a single source of truth only superficially concealed, a primal legacy uniting western and Chinese religious tradition, remained a powerfully seductive illusion.

Most Christian philosophers and theologians, Catholic and Protestant, rejected this Jesuit argument. Malebranche, who for years had suffered vehement Jesuit
attacks on his own philosophical system, closely examined their conception of Chinese *prisca theologia* in his *Entretien d’un philosophe chrétien et d’un philosophe chinois sur l’existence et la nature de Dieu* (Conference of a Christian Philosopher and a Chinese Philosopher on the Existence and Nature of God) (1708 ed.). Confucianism, argues Malebranche, is a purely monistic philosophy that nowhere provides any true separation of body and mind, thought and extension. In Confucianism, one finds immortality, but no sin of the soul, nothing spiritual. Classical Chinese thought, he argued, exactly like Bayle (but with entirely opposite aims), conflates body and mind into one, reducing the totality of what is to a single substance (Lai 1985, 156; Canetelli 1969, 263; Davis 1983, 534; Mungello 1998, 97–98). The neo-Confucian principle of *Li*, though an emanation notionally distinct from matter (*zhi* 质), while reflecting the supreme rationality of the universe, is not conceived, held Malebranche, as existing independently of matter. *Li* lacks intelligence, benevolence and freedom of will. Hence, the *Li* of Malebranche’s “Chinese philosopher” creates only through the necessity of its nature without knowing or wishing any of what it creates or influences (Malebranche 1958, 3, 14). For the Chinese, what in the West is designated “spirit” or “soul” consists not of pure spirit but of “*matière organisée et subtilisée*” (matter organized and modified) (Malebranche 1958, 12; Lai 1985, 157; Mungello 1980, 556, 559).

Malebranche rejected such ideas, finding the Chinese grossly in error in supposing our perceptions are just “modifications of matter.” Nature, he contended, is evidently devoid of motion and sensibility and hence altogether inert. The Spinozist-Confucian hypothesis of force and movement innate in bodies he despised as entirely false, as well as morally pernicious. The “rationality and energy animating Nature in our universe,” he insists, against the Confucianists and Spinozists, “must derive wholly from outside, via a decree of God” (Malebranche 1958, 13, 40; Robinet 1955, 487; Lai 1985, 173–74). By depicting Confucianism as a system in which the active, creative force in the universe, *Li*, “is neither free nor has intelligence” and is inseparable from the inert matter it permeates, Malebranche, like Bayle, Collins and d’Argens, again firmly bound the European controversy over Chinese philosophy to Spinoza.

Malebranche had already assailed Spinoza, in his *Entretiens sur la métaphysique*, of 1688, if again only indirectly, by allusion (Malebranche 1997, 149–51). But no-one was misled by this strategy. When Malebranche says “*Chinois*,” retorted his Jesuit critics, “il pense Spinoza” (he has Spinoza in mind) (Malebranche 1958, Appendix 42–43; Perkins 2004, 166; Israel 2007, 13–14). By rendering his Jesuit critics tacit allies of Spinoza, Malebranche damaged them, especially his opponent Father Joséphe René Tournemine (1661–1739), by linking them to atheism—in effect, paying Tournemine back in his own coin—while powerfully reaffirming strict Cartesian dualism against
one-substance monism. He created a wide gulf between his variant of Christian Cartesianism and the “Spinozism” favoured, he implied, by the Jesuits (Lai 1985, 167). Afterwards, he claimed he had written the tract on Confucianism not to injure the Jesuits, or harm the missionary efforts in China, but to strike against Spinozism which he (like the Jesuits) believed was now making “de grands ravages” (great ravages) in France (Pinot 1932, 331; Mungello 1980, 561).

The debate about the true nature of Chinese thought was employed by Malebranche to promote his rationalistic dualism in the eyes of the French clergy and court as the safest and most viable Christian metaphysics—and the most effective answer to Spinoza. It was a shrewd tactic which, however, incurred the disadvantage of provoking Tournemine and another Jesuit, Jean Hardouin (1646–1729), into redoubling their attacks on him (Mungello 1980, 564). The Jesuits conceded “the impious system of Spinoza” was making worrying advances in France and that this added a special twist to the debate about China. But by publishing a dialogue in which one finds much similarity between “les impietez de Spinosa et celle de notre philosophe Chinois” (Spinoza’s impieties and the thought of our Chinese philosopher [i.e., Confucius]), Malebranche, they complained, unjustly slandered the Jesuits, maligned China, and presented a ridiculous travesty of Confucianism without delivering a meaningful blow against Spinozism.

In this dispute the Jesuits were not wholly without allies. The German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) had taken an interest in Jesuit efforts in China at least since his visit to Rome, in 1689 (Cook 1981, 257; Israel 2006, 652–56). He was the one major European thinker of the age fully persuaded that “there was nothing idolatrous or atheistic in the teachings of Confucius” (Leibniz 1768, IV, 82–84; Leibniz 1996, 501). Through correspondence with Jesuits, he was won over to the view that a common ancient source for both Chinese and Judaeo-Christian religion existed, though this idea was not in fact really essential to his universalist position, which revolved, rather, around the idea that both traditions derive from reason. In the search for eternal truths, Christianity and classical Chinese thought, he concluded, proceeded in parallel, and equally presented the basic elements of Natural Theology. In the last months of his life, Leibniz directly intervened in the furor over Chinese philosophy. After annotating Malebranche’s rebuttal of Confucianism, in November 1715, he composed his Discours sur la théologie naturelle des Chinois (Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese) (1716). Here, he comprehensively contradicts Malebranche, claiming Confucianists do distinguish an “intelligentsia supra mundana” (supernatural intelligence) from the material cosmos. Leibniz eulogized the classical tradition of Chinese thought, broadly accepting the claims of Couplet and Le Comte, dismissed by Arnauld, Bayle and Malebranche (Mungello 1980, 575–77; Schmidt-Glintzer 1999, 273–75; Perkins
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Meanwhile, virtually the same critique of classical Chinese thought as advanced by Malebranche against the Jesuits was employed, with only slight modification, by radical writers in pursuit of strikingly different goals. A clear example are the several discourses on Chinese culture, chronology and literature of Boulainvilliers’ disciple, Nicolas Fréret (1688–1749), including his discourse on Chinese writing which, though composed for an address to the Parisian Académie des Inscriptions, in December 1718, remained unpublished until 1731 (Elisséeff-Poisle 1978, 72; Larrère 1994, 109; Spence 1988, 16, 139; Weststeijn, 2007, 538). Over many years, Fréret held a sustained interest in China and actually learnt some Chinese, studying the language with Arcade Huang (i.e., Huang Jialüe), a bilingual young Chinese man attached as a translator to the Bibliothèque du Roi. Corresponding with missionaries active in China between 1714 and 1733, Fréret came to scorn the idea that Chinese thinkers believed in “natural religion.” He too maintained rather that Chinese philosophy acknowledges neither Creation nor Providence and does not acknowledge any God “c’est à dire, d’Être distingué de l’Univers, qui ait produit ou créé le monde” (that is a being distinct from the universe who has produced or created the world, who governs and conserves it in accordance with laws which he has established) (Spence 1988, 166; Pinot 1932, 345–46). In his notes on Couplet’s Confucius Sinarum philosophus, Fréret ridiculed the Jesuits’ credulity and self-delusion regarding miracles and Natural Theology, contending that Confucius never speaks of a sovereign being nor of the immortality of the soul, “ni de l’autre vie” (nor of another life).

Thus, Fréret, echoing Malebranche, powerfully reaffirmed Bayle’s, as well as Vossius’ and Temple’s, standpoint during the second quarter of the eighteenth century, proclaiming Confucius’ thought so full of deep insights about both individual morality and society that one could only wish all men would practice it, “pour le bonheur du genre humain” (for the happiness of the human race) (Fréret 1776, 112). Eulogizing Confucius’ aversion to metaphysics and theology, Fréret interprets the spirituality of which Confucius speaks as something intimately united to all things “et qui n’en peut estre separé” (and which cannot be separated from them). Hence, Confucian spirituality resembled the world-soul “ou à la vertu active des Spinozistes” (or the active virtue of the Spinozists) (Vernière 1982, 352–53; Larrère 1994, 114; Elisséeff-Poisle 1978, 54). Confucius, concludes Fréret, had no conception of divine providence, his notion of the creative principle in Nature being entirely that of the operations of matter (Elisséeff-Poisle 1978, 55; Larrère 1994, 114). Fréret thus entirely agreed with both Bayle and Malebranche in recognizing that the issue of Spinozism crucially underlay the entire European debate about Chinese philosophy. He did so, though, opposing Malebranche’s strategy and, like Bayle, deploying his argument

This great Chinese thinker, insisted the thinkers of the Radical Enlightenment, exhorts men to virtue purely for its own sake, not to improve the chances of their souls’ redemption. Confucius had been the vehicle of an early form of Enlightenment which had transformed Chinese society, freeing it from superstition, aristocracy and religious authority. Radical enlighteners held that everything the Jesuits asserted about Chinese conceptions of the Divinity and the universe was false (Elisseeff-Poisle 1978, 54, 91). Confucianism was thus taken both by anti-Jesuit critics like Malebranche and by anti-Christian radicals to be totally at odds with what mainstream western philosophers, theologians and educators considered the most fundamental principles of eternal truth “en morale et métaphysique” (in morality and politics)—God, divine governance of the world and the need for religious authority (Larrère 1994, 163).

References


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