

**Snapshot in Comparative Thought****A note on the significance of Leibniz's *Novissima Sinica***

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**Abstract:** Leibniz (1646—1716) was convinced of what could be called "the unity of mankind." In particular, he believed in the existence of universally valid ethics. Leibniz argued for such universality from different perspectives. Thereby, he conceived of what he regarded as Confucian or Chinese teachings as important evidence for his conviction, and strongly suggested that European politicians, philosophers and theologians should utilize these teachings for correcting culturalist prejudices and defending or (further) developing universal ethics. Though Leibniz's interpretations of the Chinese teachings in his famous *Novissima Sinica* are questionable, his approach to understanding and utilizing them has remained of timeless valuable. The aim of the paper is to show that these points are still relevant. They are indispensable for coping with racism and cultural fundamentalisms. In Germany, for instance, there exist movements and organizations that—to say the least—grossly overestimate the significance of so-called cultural identity—thus falling behind even Leibniz's philosophy. This may provoke the question of whether Germans should or could again learn from China.

**Keywords:** Over-generalization, universalization, facts and norms, so-called cultural identity, and universal ethics

Should we break an egg at the larger end or at the smaller end? As Jonathan Swift (1667—1745) in *Gulliver's Travels* relates, in Lilliput this question led to civil war, and became one reason for continuous war with a neighboring country. That "many hundred large volumes" were "published upon this [egg-]controversy," (pp. 52—53) also testified to its significance. In Taliban Afghanistan, the life of a man could depend on whether he wore a beard or not. In the beginning of the 20th century, political powers in Korea forced men to cut their hair short. While in modern China, the short-cut hair was regarded as severe violations of Confucian traditions, this led to uprisings.

It is always possible to distinguish between cultures by referring to certain particularities. Be it different haircuts, different eating conventions, the way one cleans one's nose, etc.: possibilities to distinguish one's own tradition from other traditions by referring to highly specific though actually trivial features are numerous, the more so since such features can be—willfully—declared to be essential for survival or even salvation. Adherents of postmodernism supported such temptations by their praise of "la différence." Some scholars even maintain that preservation and defense of so-called cultural identity<sup>1</sup> is a human right. Apparently, no idea is too stupid or farfetched to not becoming a helpless victim of academic, political, or religious willfulness or eccentricity. In the European Community, nationalism is on the rise, often ignoring the life-endangering situations of refugees from Africa and the Near East, though all EC countries have vowed to abide by the universal norms of human rights. The Communist Party of China emphasizes "Chinese characteristics," though especially notions of *ren* in the *Lunyu*, the *Mengzi*, and the *Xunzi*—as for instance *ren* as abidance by the Golden Rule—have universal features. (Paul 1990 and 2010) Outstanding Chinese scholars like Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895—1990) or Guo Morou 郭沫若 (1892—1978) were probably of the same opinion.

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<sup>1</sup> As to the problems of concepts of cultural identity, see Paul 2010, Notions.

One ought to distinguish between facts and norms, and between over-generalization and universality. It would certainly be questionable if Germans would demand that the whole world eat sauerkraut. However, to demand that nobody must be tortured or raped, would be a different case. What is important to note is that questions of validity are ultimately independent from age, tradition, origin, authorship, etc. Whether the Pythagorean theorem was formulated by Pythagoras, whether first from a Greek or a Chinese mathematician, whether 2500 or 3000 years ago—this has nothing to do with its validity. Traditions and conventions may be old: this mere fact does not permit for concluding that they ought to be continued. I may have been a member of a soccer club for 30 years. It could nevertheless prove to have been a mistake. In any case, I could cancel my membership. The Mohists pointed out that certain old conventions ought to be discontinued because they were inhumane. For them, the norms of humaneness were more important than abidance by tradition.

### **Leibniz and the *Novissima Sinica***

Like almost no other philosopher and scientist, Leibniz tried to distinguish between valid and invalid theories. As an (outstanding) logician and mathematician, he would never have believed that there could exist particular Eastern fundamental rules of logic that could make successful communication between East and West ultimately impossible—as a number of Chinese and Western logicians do indeed maintain. According to Leibniz, even god must abide by the universally valid rules of logic—in contrast to human beings, by the way, who can violate logical laws without, however, invalidating them by such violations.

Thus, the *Novissima Sinica*, "Newest information about China," is of no merely historical significance. Also, it is not simply and merely a welcome antidote against culturalist fashions. Regarding the method and contents of Leibniz's approach, they have of timeless relevance for any intercultural study and discourse. This relevance may be summed up as follows:

(1) Leibniz does not raise any pseudo questions. He does not deal with absurdities, and at least implicitly refutes the idea of unbridgeable cultural differences—which is untenable anyway, if we really accept that all human beings are human beings.

(2) He clearly distinguishes between historical—or, more general—descriptive questions on the one hand and questions of validity—normative problems—on the other.

(3) Leibniz tries hard to gain as much (reliable) information about China and things Chinese, not simply for the sake of gathering knowledge but as components to be used for developing a transcultural philosophy.

(4) Leibniz reflects on Chinese culture without any arrogance.

The value of the specific contents of the *Novissima Sinica*, however, may have often been overrated. Perhaps because of confusing the historical influence of the *Novissima* with the contents itself. In short, Leibniz maintains that Chinese philosophy, or even Chinese culture in general (if I may say so) have these features:

(i) distained human aggression ("... asperantur, quicquid in hominibus feritatem quandam facit ...")

(ii) detested and strongly rejected war ("... bella aversantur."),

(iii) advocated a kind of natural theology ("Theologiae naturalis"),

(iv) believed in and argued for the civilizing power of (humane and becoming) conventions and traditions.

Leibniz further held that (v) Chinese emperors were morally exemplary rulers. He thus argued

that this Chinese wisdom could, and ought to, serve as an antidote against the immeasurably growing moral decay ("Certe talis nostrorum rerum mihi videtur esse condition in immensum corruptelis ...") in Europe.

Parts of these interpretations of Chinese philosophy can indeed be supported by reference to classic *rujia* 儒家 (Confucian legacy), especially the *Book of Xunzi* (Paul 1990 and 2010)—which Leibniz did not know. First, natural and rational theology are certainly more favorable to humaneness, peace, and universal ethics than confessional and revelational theology. Second, a kind of aesthetical education—to use an expression by the German poet Friedrich Schiller—can turn humane and beautiful customs into a kind of second human nature that furthers humaneness. Such "aesthetical education" is strongly advocated in the *Lunyu* (Confucian Analects) and, even more, in the *Xunzi* (The Work of Xun Zi). Third, credibility of politicians furthers their success. I need not emphasize that regimes that violate human rights as e.g. the United States, Saudi Arabia, or Germany (in supporting inhumane US politics) are in a psychologically (though not logically) very weak position when criticizing human rights violations of other states.

Leibniz also defended the Jesuits by arguing that the Chinese Confucius' cult was of a secular (and of no religious) kind. In addition, he supported the idea that the Christian mission in China should respect as far as possible Chinese ways of living and traditions.

Leibniz strongly influenced the philosopher Christian Wolff (1679—1754). Also, like Leibniz, Wolff admired 'Confucianism'. He wrote a famous treatise in which he, again similar to Leibniz, argued in favor of an ethics inspired by *rujia* teachings (Wolff, Paul). Because of this treatise, he was accused of atheism and even threatened to be executed. Wolff thus fled from the University of Halle and the state of Prussia. This occurred about 300 years ago but may still be taken as a serious warning against fundamentalist politics of cultural identity. Force is no acceptable way for any cultural reflections.

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