

## RECENT WORK

### **LEARNING FROM BAD TEACHERS: LEIBNIZ AS A PROPAEDEUTIC FOR CHINESE PHILOSOPHY**

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**ABSTRACT:** *One of the challenges facing instructors of Chinese philosophy courses at many Western universities is the fact that students can often bring orientalizing assumptions and expectations to their encounters with primary sources. This paper examines the nature of this student bias and surveys four pedagogical approaches to confronting it in the context of undergraduate Chinese philosophy curricula. After showcasing some of the inadequacies of these approaches, I argue in favor of a fifth approach that deploys sources from the “pre-history” of comparative philosophy, viz. documents by some of the first Western interpreters of Chinese thought. Such sources give students an access point to the Chinese primary source material that might be prima facie more culturally familiar, while also prompting them to recognize the limitations of that perspective. Of course, most of these early Western interpretations are naive, ignorant, or even blatantly xenophobic; but as Confucius stresses, even bad role-models can still serve as effective teachers by reminding us of pitfalls to avoid (Analects 7.22). Thus, if we can appreciate the failings of earlier interpretive efforts, we may be more cautious and open-minded in how we ourselves approach primary texts. An analysis is given of the hermeneutic climate of early modern European-Chinese comparativism, and Leibniz’s writings on Confucianism are unpacked as a specific case-study of this teaching strategy.*

**Keywords:** *teaching philosophy, Confucius, Leibniz, Matteo Ricci, Ming Dynasty*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1602, the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci produced the first European-style Chinese world map.<sup>1</sup> The map’s singularity earned it the nickname “Impossible Black Tulip,” a

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<sup>1</sup> Ricci’s authorship of the map has recently been disputed, based on several apparent oddities in its epigrams and topographies. For example, the Italian coastline is severely distorted and the Papal States

reference to the Dutch mania for such a flower. Like much of the rest of Ricci's work on Chinese religion and philosophy, however, the map is a bit of a hermeneutic paradox: it is filled with false essentialisms, exoticisms, and forced translations that are culturally self-serving; yet it was also an important first step for Westerners to start to understand China. The teaching of Chinese philosophy today presents its own kind of Impossible Black Tulip. Students often bring a variety of Riccian assumptions and expectations to the table, and although they are frequently disabused of these when they confront the primary source material, they lack any explicit framework for contextualizing such assumptions. Like Ricci's map, their assumptions can distort, but they can also be leveraged as a useful bridge to understanding biases.

Toward this end, in the first few sessions of my own course, before reading Chinese philosophy *proper*, I have students engage with texts from what might be called the "pre-history" of comparative philosophy; that is, documents by some of the first Western interpreters of China. The goal is to give students an access point to the Chinese primary source material that might be *prima facie* more culturally familiar, while also prompting them to recognize the limitations of that perspective. Of course, like the Black Tulip map, most of these early Western interpretations are naive, ignorant, distortive, and orientalizing. Several are blatantly racist or xenophobic, and many will undoubtedly strike contemporary scholars of Chinese philosophy as downright bizarre. But as Confucius remarks, education can come in unexpected guises:

When walking with two other people, I will always find a teacher among them. I focus on those who are good and seek to emulate them, and focus on those who are bad in order to be reminded of what needs to be changed in myself. (*Analects* 7.22; Slingerland 2006, 21)

In other words, even bad role-models can still serve as effective teachers by reminding us of pitfalls to avoid. So if we can appreciate the failings of earlier interpretive efforts, we may be more cautious and open-minded in how we ourselves approach primary texts.

This paper explores the strengths and possible limitations of this way of framing the curriculum of Chinese philosophy. To motivate the issue, I first reflect on the nature of student bias in confronting classical primary sources, and some of the various ways of addressing it pedagogically. After showcasing some of the inadequacies of these approaches, I introduce the idea of deploying "black tulip texts" as an alternative propaedeutic. After a brief overview of the hermeneutic climate of early modern comparative philosophy, I offer as a case study of this teaching strategy Leibniz's writings on Chinese thought.

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are omitted, raising suspicions about the Ricci attribution given that he was both Italian and a Jesuit. Other unusual or absent labels and dates have been thought to suggest a much earlier composition indigenous to China. Lee (2011) suggests a date of 1430 in conjunction with the explorations of Zheng He. The exact authorship of the 1602 map does not impact the thesis defended in this paper. Indeed, if the map were in fact copied or appropriated by a Westerner from an earlier Chinese cartographer, that might only *enhance* the applicability of it as the kind of pedagogical tool described below.

## 2. WHAT HAS CHINA TO DO WITH CATHAY?

In an essay on the craft of comparative philosophy entitled “What has Athens to do with Alexandria?”, David Hall (2002) rebuts the claim that Chinese philosophy is or ought to be the sole province of either philosophers or sinologists individually, but that instead each perspective needs the other. As he puts it allegorically, *Athens* (standing for philosophers who are comfortable engaging in speculation) and *Alexandria* (representing linguistic specialists who are more intent on textual and historical minutiae) both contribute valuable and mutually reinforcing skill sets to comparative philosophy. Hall’s message is an important one for *researchers* in Chinese philosophy, but for the majority of students, his dichotomy is a non-starter. At most Western undergraduate institutions, students in a course on Chinese philosophy will generally not have the linguistic skills to approach the primary sources as sinologists, and their philosophical abilities may still only be in early development. Instead, many of the interpretive assumptions they bring to the primary sources are drawn from random popular and contemporary depictions. These assumptions tend to correspond to what Martha Nussbaum (1997) has referred to as the two “descriptive vices” of studying foreign cultures: *chauvinism* (they’re weird and we’re better) and *romanticism* (they’re weird and they’re better). In this climate, the interpretive question for most students is not what Athens and Alexandria have to do with one another, but what the China of their philosophy curriculum has to do the orientalized entity with which they are more familiar, viz. something more like the Cathay of Marco Polo that was influential in the poetical imagination of Victorian Europe.

There are several ways a teacher might respond to a priori student orientalism. In what follows I consider four different possible approaches and their limitations. This is a non-exhaustive list and the approaches need not be mutually exclusive. Although the limitations I identify are not necessary or endemic features of the approaches (i.e. creative and well-prepared instructors may be able to find ways to transcend them), I argue that the alternate fifth approach I offer at the end of this section ultimately has superior pedagogical advantages on the whole.

One approach to dealing with a priori student orientalism could be to simply ignore student biases and optimistically dive right into the Chinese primary sources, confident that the texts themselves will ultimately disabuse readers of their prejudices. Let us call this the Textual Approach. I find the Textual Approach not only ineffective, but naive and even pedagogically irresponsible. Texts never “speak for themselves” and even if they could, undergraduate survey courses typically do not allow enough time on any given text for organic clarification to bubble up on its own accord. Moreover, part of what I take to be the charge of teachers of Chinese philosophy (at least at the undergraduate level and to Western constituencies) is not merely to deliver the contents of classical Chinese texts, but to cultivate more general comparative skills.

A second approach to dealing with student orientalism is to call out these assumptions directly and early in the term. Let us call this the Directive Approach. While this has some advantage over the Textual Approach in that it actually provides an explicit anti-bias interpretive framework, it can be much too tyrannical. Students’

interpretive biases might be corrected, but the Directive Approach makes no provision for acknowledging the possibility of an instructor herself being biased. Of course, it very well might be that an instructor is not biased individually, but by directing students to a “correct” interpretation which the instructor dictates from the beginning, the Directive Approach provides no check or balance against potential bias: students are given no context for considering alternative interpretations or the possibility that the specific approach to which they are directed might be incomplete.

A third approach might avoid the limitations of both the Textual and the Directive Approaches by prefacing the course with explicit attention to some of the theoretical dimensions of hermeneutics, post-colonialism, and orientalism. We can call this the Otherness Approach. One of the problems with this approach, however, is that very few texts in theoretical hermeneutics are manageable for early-career philosophy undergraduates (let alone general education students), and those which might be manageable tend to either be overly abstract and not particular to China, or require that an instructor spend a lot of important class time early in the term unpacking them. Moreover, lengthy class periods devoted to theoretical hermeneutics at the start of a term not only seem overly defensive and preemptive, but are also likely to scare the students away from subsequently risking their own interpretations. Comparative philosophy courses that adopt the Otherness Approach thus run the risk of morphing into exclusively methodology courses. Of course, basic points from theoretical hermeneutics can indeed be presented in user-friendly introductory ways quite efficiently by adept teachers. If this material is presented too cursorily, however, or without unpacking the details of primary hermeneutic texts, the Otherness Approach threatens to simply reduce to a more theoretical version of the Directive Approach, except that whatever interpretive biases an instructor might have are now repackaged and reified with the support of an interpretive methodology that is itself directed a priori. Dictating to students the correct interpretation of a text is not very different from dictating to students the correct theory of interpretation of a text.

Rather than frontload a course with cumbersome theoretical material as the Otherness Approach does, a fourth Comparative Approach instead builds into a curriculum periodic points of contact, where students must critically juxtapose a Chinese primary source with a Western philosophical idea, or examine the Chinese source in light of multiple, competing interpretations presented in secondary sources. This is clearly the best of the four approaches, since not only does it actually involve doing real comparative philosophy, but it also exposes students to contemporary scholarship and debates. One limitation of the Comparative Approach, however, is that in any comparison per se, the *comparanda* come logically prior to the *comparans*, for there must an object of the comparing. To compare, say, Xun Zi and Hobbes, one must start with an antecedent familiarity with first one then the other, and *then* put the two into comparison. But since, in this way, the Comparative Approach can only be deployed after a primary source has been read, that leaves the initial encounter with a text prone to the same problems plaguing the Textual Approach, viz. insisting that the text impossibly “speak for itself” with no pedagogical guidance. Alternately, if it is attempted to position the Comparative Approach prior to reading any primary sources,

it would become essentially tantamount to the Otherness Approach; for “comparison” in the absence of *comparanda* would be equivalent to introducing a purely theoretical perspective, with all the potential limitations facing that approach that we considered above.

In summary, there are notable limitations facing each of the aforementioned approaches—what I have called the Textual, Directive, Otherness, and Comparative Approaches. This is not to say, however, that these limitations are ineliminable. Reflective and creative teachers of classical Chinese philosophy can perhaps find workarounds for some of the worries I have raised, or might combine elements of multiple approaches in an effort to mitigate the difficulties of each. Moreover, each of the four approaches does indeed have certain attractions. After all, the Textual Approach is undeniably a time-efficient way to dive right into the primary sources and it promotes a refreshing immediacy and openness to a student’s first encounter with a text. The Directive Approach, when used properly, can provide students with essential guideposts for their encounters with primary texts that can forestall wildly erroneous individual interpretations before they have the opportunity to fester. The Otherness Approach can furnish students with a theoretical framework for appreciating differences well beyond the classroom. And the Comparative Approach helps students to discover the familiar in something otherwise alien and to problematize what is presumed to be familiar.

Given the potential limitations of each approach, however, I want to propose a new fifth approach, which we can call the Historical Approach, and which takes Ricci’s Black Tulip map as a metaphor. The Historical Approach begins the curriculum of Chinese philosophy not by diving right into the Chinese primary sources (as the Textual Approach does), not by stipulating the “right way” to interpret the primary sources (as the Directive Approach does), and not by getting bogged down in purely abstract theoretical issues (as the Otherness Approach does). Rather, the Historical Approach begins by having students work through a specific *Western* text that represents an early interpretive engagement with Chinese thought. Opening a course in such a way has several pedagogical attractions. First, it showcases obvious interpretive errors, and so, in the spirit of the *Analects* passage quoted earlier (which reminds us we can learn even from those who are wrong), the Historical Approach helps students reflect on their own assumptions. Neither the Textual Approach nor the Directive Approach necessarily facilitate such reflection (they certainly can do so, but it is not an intrinsic feature of them)—the former does not because it ignores biases altogether, the latter does not because in dictating the “correct” interpretation to students, it restricts outlets for self-critique. By contrast, early Western comparative texts often have cross-cultural attitudes which are so obviously chauvinistic or romanticist that they cannot be ignored. Second, the Historical Approach furnishes the opportunity to reflect on comparativist methodology, as the Otherness Approach does, but in a way that is concrete and directly relevant to China. Unlike the Otherness Approach, the Historical Approach is also much less likely to scare students away from later participation since they can see the ways in which even the best minds of Western philosophy got it wrong. And finally, the Historical Approach, unlike the Comparative Approach, can

(indeed should) be deployed right from the start of a course, before any hermeneutic bad habits have become entrenched. For this reason, the Historical Approach is also perfectly compatible with the Comparative Approach, with a course starting Historically and progressing Comparatively. Indeed, the two approaches are complementary: the Historical Approach shows that comparative philosophy is not a newfangled undertaking, and the Comparative Approach shows how comparative philosophy can and has actually made a great deal of progress.

Moreover, the Historical Approach can absorb many of the attractions of the other four approaches, while largely avoiding their difficulties. For example, the worry with the Directive Approach is that it insufficiently provides for mechanisms for stepping away from whatever interpretive framework is directed. This worry is not endemic in the same way to the Historical Approach. Although instructors implementing the Historical Approach might of course still be biased themselves, the Historical Approach focuses attention away from the instructor and onto the historical text; this text may be biased (the Leibnizian sources presented below as examples certainly are), but its historical nature makes such bias easier to recognize as such, and therefore potentially easier to mitigate. Regarding the Otherness Approach and the worry that frontloading a syllabus with readings in theoretical hermeneutics bogs down the curriculum prior to getting to the primary sources, using the Historical Approach, by contrast, students get to experience the interpretive orientation of the historical text in question without having it presented to them as objectively authoritative, insofar as it is explicitly the sole orientation of the historical voice in question.

Convinced of the advantages of this new teaching approach, I therefore want to offer one specific text which I have found particularly useful: Leibniz's writings on China. But first, some brief historical contextualization.

### 3. THE DOCTRINE OF THE MING

Sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe was distinctly preoccupied with China. After generations of unsuccessful missionary forays into the mainland, China finally opened its borders to the Jesuits, with Matteo Ricci being the first European allowed into the Forbidden City in 1601 by the Wangli Emperor (Ming Dynasty). The conventional wisdom attributes Ricci's and the Jesuits' popularity to a combination of their Catholic respect for tradition and learning, which resonated with the Confucian court (though at the expense of Buddhism and Daoism), and their scientific knowledge (especially in astronomy and geometry).<sup>2</sup> For the rest of the Ming Dynasty, *xixue* ("Western learning") became all the rage at court.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Regarding the Jesuit denigration of Buddhism and Daoism (and also especially the Song Dynasty Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi, which the missionaries regarded as unacceptably materialist) see Mungello (1985, 68-71). For the spread of Western astronomy in China, see Sivin (1973). Mungello (1985, 25-28) notes that the astronomy which the Jesuits presented to the Chinese literati morphed somewhat schizophrenically as rapid scientific revolution was occurring back in Europe between the paradigms of Brahe, Galileo, and Aristotle/Ptolemy. Presumably what contributed to the positive Chinese reception of the Jesuits' astronomical teachings was their more *practical* successes, e.g. at predicting eclipses.

Of course, the cultural transmission worked in the other direction too. Ming theorists had advanced the idea that “outer barbarians” (*waiyi*) should be encouraged to travel to inner China in order to be “transformed” (*laihua*). The *laihua* effect on the Jesuit missionaries was enormous. The reports that filtered back to Europe from Ricci and his colleagues sparked deep philosophical and theological controversies—notably, the *Terms Controversy* (whether Chinese had a word for God), the *Origins Controversy* (whether Chinese ancient history jibed with Biblical dates for humanity’s descent from Noah), and the *Rites Controversy* (whether Confucian rituals qualified as “religious” observances or not). These debates divided intellectuals and Christian denominations fiercely. The Jesuits, for their part, urged accommodation—that is, the attitude of interpreting China in a way that revealed universal, trans-cultural commonalities.<sup>4</sup> *Yes*, Chinese has indigenous words for God (*shangdi*, *tian*, etc.). *Yes*, Chinese mythology is consonant with Biblical genealogy (indeed, the Sage King Fuxi might actually have been Noah himself!). *No*, Confucian rituals are not “religious”, and therefore not pagan or condemnable (they are “merely” civic expressions).

With the transition to the Qing Dynasty in 1644, the Chinese court continued to be accommodating, with the Kangzi Emperor passing an Edict of Toleration for Christianity in 1692. In Europe, however, the Jesuits were trumped by Pope Clement XI who declared that Confucianism was in fact pagan and blasphemous (1707). This stance, however, only served to further stimulate the humanists of the Enlightenment, who began contrasting what they saw as Chinese secularism and naturalism versus Rome’s sectarianism and superstition. Christian Wolff famously lost his academic position after delivering a controversial lecture in 1721 comparing Confucius to Jesus and praising China for an ethics separated from metaphysics.<sup>5</sup> Voltaire perfectly sums up the situation: “Some European writers who had never been to China had claimed that the government of Peking was atheistic; Wolff had praised the philosophers of Peking, hence Wolff was an atheist. Envy and hatred never constructed a better syllogism” (1764, 167).

Over time, the European view of China as secular fetish faded into stereotypes of China as static and enervated. This gradual shift from Nussbaum’s romanticism to chauvinism might be attributed in part to the reforms and revolutions of Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which celebrated the free individual, thereby making the central authority of the Chinese government seem to Western commentators less utopian and more despotic.<sup>6</sup> Confucianism started to get associated

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<sup>3</sup> Mungello (2013, 15-52) gives a detailed overview of the Chinese acceptance of Christianity and European science.

<sup>4</sup> The terminology of “accommodation” is developed by Mungello (1985).

<sup>5</sup> See Loudon (2002) for a more comprehensive account of the case of Wolff in relation to other European attitudes toward China. For analysis of Wolff’s remarks in the broader context of shifting Christian theology (notably the debate about voluntarism), see Larrimore (2000).

<sup>6</sup> Fuchs (2006) pegs Montesquieu as one of the first voices of this new attitude toward China. François Quesnay’s *The Despotism of China* (1767) is another early expression of the new chauvinism toward China, using its alleged totalitarianism as an argument against what he saw as a similar tyrannical strand in Plato’s *Republic*.

(negatively) with growing anxieties about Spinozism.<sup>7</sup> Kant and Herder used China to articulate their new scientific conceptions of race.<sup>8</sup> Marx denigrates China as “vegetative” in order to highlight the initiative of the Proletariat.<sup>9</sup> Weber recruits China as a foil for his Protestant Ethic.<sup>10</sup> And of course political and economic rhetoric throughout the twentieth century exploited Chinese stereotypes, from the Sick Man of Asia to the Red Scare.

The point of this historiography is to emphasize that, in both good and bad ways and out of a variety of motivations, Europe was already doing versions of comparative philosophy from the very beginning of its encounter with China. By prefacing the curriculum of a course on Chinese philosophy with this history of European reception, students get to see that comparative philosophy has always been an intrinsic part of the Western intellectual tradition, and not some trendy modern outgrowth of political correctness. Moreover, many of the early modern European interpretive stances have echoes in the antecedent views students bring into the classroom—be it the accommodationist views of the Jesuits, the romanticisms of the humanists, or the chauvinisms of later theologians and revolutionaries.

Of course, the pre-history of European comparative philosophy is full of plenty of biases and errors. David Mungello, who has written comprehensively about the shifting early modern European reception of China, rightly raises suspicions about the hermeneutics of what I have called the Historical Approach. As he says, “Using another culture to support a cultural program is not the most objective way to understand the other culture and inevitably results in its distortion” (Mungello 2013, 139). But given the enduring influence which this formative period of comparative philosophy continues to exert in popular consciousness, “objectivity” (or what Mungello champions as “understanding China for its own sake”) simply might not be the most realistic pedagogical tactic. Seeking such “objectivity” would seem to plunge introductory Chinese philosophy classes into analogous problems as those I have claimed face the Textual, Directive, and Otherness Approaches.

So if the pre-history of Western comparative philosophy is attractive pedagogically, what is the best delivery vehicle for it? Simply lecturing on the historical overview of European attitudes toward China in the form of generalities would void many of the benefits of the Historical Approach: it is boring and pedagogically passive; it is either comprehensive at the cost of taking up way too much class time, or else it is concise at the expense of being cursory and confusing; and it fails to develop any critical textual skills in preparation for the Chinese primary sources students will encounter later in the course. A much more effective way to

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<sup>7</sup> Notably, Malebranche published a *Dialogue between a Christian and a Chinese Philosopher* (1711), using the latter as a stand-in for a strawman version of Spinozism. For an analysis of Malebranche’s and others’ association of Chinese philosophy with the perceived Spinozist threat, see Lai (1985).

<sup>8</sup> See Hsia (2001) for a closer reading of Kant’s and Herder’s attitudes toward China and race.

<sup>9</sup> From the *New York Daily Tribune* (1858), quoted in Mungello (2013, 1). One of the earliest European forerunners for the stereotype of China as economically stagnate seems to have been Adam Smith, who in *Wealth of Nations* (1776, ch.7) characterizes China as “long stationary.”

<sup>10</sup> See Weber’s Introduction to *Sociology of the World Religions* (1915).

deploy the Historical Approach is to have students work through a single, accessible, representative primary source from early modern Europe that can serve as a microcosm of the Historical Approach.

#### 4. CLAVIS SINICA

We can think of such a text as a kind of pedagogical *clavis sinica*—a “Chinese Key.” Early modern European intellectuals were obsessed with discovering a *clavis sinica* in the form of a set of finite principles and diagrams by which the Chinese language and its classical texts could be easily decoded.<sup>11</sup> A representative European text from the pre-history of comparative philosophy might help “unlock” Chinese philosophy for students in an analogous way.

In past courses, I have experimented with several candidate *claves sinicae* texts. I have concluded that many have insuperable pedagogical difficulties: Kant’s and Herder’s writings on China don’t really engage with Chinese *philosophy*, and they are also rather offensive to modern sensibilities. Malebranche’s *Dialogue between a Christian and a Chinese Philosopher* (1711) sounds promising—“Chinese philosophy” is in the title, after all—but Malebranche knew almost nothing about actual Chinese philosophy, and his “Chinese philosopher” in the dialogue is really just a stand-in for Spinoza. I have taught some of Ricci’s own works, such as excerpts from his *True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (1603) as well as his diary, but the former is more of a doctrinal catechism and the latter has no real direct philosophical content (it focuses more on legal, logistical, and linguistic matters).

One source with which I have had some success is the art genre of *chinoiserie*, which was extremely popular in the Rococo.<sup>12</sup> For example, I have shown classes paintings by Francoise Boucher, delftware ceramics, Louis XIV furniture, the so-called “Chinese Room” at Schönbrunn Palace, etc. and have them talk about the qualities, adjectives, and associations that come to mind, and what these might tell us indirectly about European attitudes toward China at the time. This exercise is fun, but it has several limitations: the stylistic analyses and aesthetic descriptions can be too subjective, and there is nothing about the content that is particular to philosophy (either European or Chinese).

The best *clavis sinica* text I have settled on is drawn from Leibniz’s writings on China, primarily his preface to the *Novissima Sinica* (“News from China”), containing several Jesuit translations, reports, and commentaries on Chinese thought, which Leibniz edited in 1697. This is about a 10 page text, and I append to it brief selections from Leibniz’s *On the Civil Cult of Confucius* (1700) and *Remarks on Chinese Rites*

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<sup>11</sup> Andreas Müller was one of the most notorious advocates of the *clavis sinica*, and claimed to have discovered one which he jealously safeguarded. See Müller’s *Proposal on a Key Suitable for Chinese* (1674).

<sup>12</sup> The art movement has remained influential even in more recent styles. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York recently devoted an exhibition to the history of *chinoiserie* in fashion (“China through the Looking Glass,” spring 2015). Apropos for this paper, Valentino even created a dress for the gala riffing on the Black Tulip motif.

*and Religion* (1708).<sup>13</sup> Leibniz aficionados may also be aware of his longer *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese* (1716), which I have not found as useful pedagogically: it is much too long and it requires too much contextualization with Leibniz's own philosophy (e.g. pre-established harmonies, monads, binary mathematics, etc.), through which he reads the Chinese classics. Yet, even Leibniz scholars may be less well acquainted with his writings on China, for they are not typically broached even in graduate-level encounters. Franklin Perkins confronts this neglect:

The reason Leibniz's engagement with China appears so surprising and worthy of attention is its contrast with the disinterest of his contemporaries. Yet our reaction of surprise should itself be surprising and worthy of attention. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, information from other cultures flooded into Europe, while Europe's economy became more and more obviously global. In this context of globalization, the odd phenomenon should not be Leibniz's writings on China but that everyone else showed so little interest in the world outside Europe. How could Descartes, so interested in the nature of "man," show no interest in the variety of human beings? How could Locke, an "empiricist," show so little interest in the experiences of non-Europeans? (Perkins 2004, ix)

Leibniz was enormously curious about all things Chinese. And he was regarded by many in Europe as one of the great authorities on China. Clergy, aristocrats, other intellectuals, and even linguists would write to him for sinological clarification or for news from the Chinese missions. He was viewed as a sort of liaison to China, and even refers to himself as the "bureau of address for China... because everyone knows that one has only to address me in order to learn some news."<sup>14</sup> There is thus good reason to read Leibniz's writings on China for those interested in Leibniz's own philosophy, since many of his epistemological and metaphysical commitments both influenced and were influenced by his exposure to Chinese philosophy.

On a metaphysical level, [cultural] exchange is driven by the value of diversity in the best possible world and the derivation of diversity from variations in monadic perspectives. On an epistemological level, exchange is driven by the necessary limits of our own perspectives and the fact that monads in distant places have different and complementary perspectives. (Perkins 2004, 108)

More specifically, Leibniz seems most interested in China as a repository of recorded empirical observations, which he thinks can help inject content into otherwise overly-abstract Western theoretical frameworks. In this way, Leibniz's writings reveal him to be deeply dualistic in how he regards Chinese philosophy, yet he sees neither culture as inferior to the other; or rather the West is superior in some ways, inferior in

<sup>13</sup> These have been annotated and packaged together in Cook & Rosemont (1994).

<sup>14</sup> From Leibniz's 1697 letter to Sophie Charlotte of Brandenburg. See G.W. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, Vol. 1, ed. Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften (Darmstadt/Leipzig/Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1923-), p.869.

other ways. But he sees both perspectives as necessary in order to grasp truth. Specifically, the following binary oppositions are evident in Leibniz:

<u>Europe</u>	<u>China</u>
Revealed Religion	Natural Religion
Theory	Practice
Science	Ethics
Form	Content

However, in addition to revealing an important dimension of Leibniz's own thinking, his writings on China are also excellent ways to introduce students to Chinese philosophy generally. The *Novissima Sinica* preface, for example, is a goldmine for the Historical Approach. Not only does it afford students the opportunity to see one of the West's most canonical philosophers grapple explicitly with Confucianism, but Leibniz also articulates a remarkable awareness of his own comparative methodology. He is aware, for example, of the possibility of interpretive distortion, even if well-intentioned: "If we ever impute to Confucius doctrines that are not his, certainly no pious deception would be more innocent, since danger to those mistaken and offense to those who teach is absent" (Cook & Rosemont 1994, 63).

Of course, he is also not adverse to taking interpretive liberties in order to make the foreign seem more familiar: when dealing with an alien Chinese idea, he says in the *Civil Cult of Confucius* that "it is advisable to give it the most favorable meaning—as the Apostle Paul is said to have done in taking the altar erected to an unknown god as having been instituted by the Athenians for ties which they ought to have celebrated rather than for those which they usually practiced" (Cook & Rosemont 1994, 63). In his *Remarks on Chinese Rites and Religion*, he rather arrogantly asserts that, "Since the philosophy of the Chinese has never been organized in a systematic form, and, I very much suspect, they lack philosophical terminology, nothing prevents interpreting what the ancients [of China] teach about divine and spiritual things in a more favorable sense" (Cook & Rosemont 1994, 72).<sup>15</sup> And in a letter to Joachim Bouvet (a Jesuit in China) he claims that

...in all this [interpretation] it is necessary to go with all the good faith possible, without any disguise, which could be prejudicial to those who are authorities among us; for it is certain that one will always find that one truth is in accord with another, and that the holy Scripture never holds anything wrong. (Widmaier 1999, 61; quoted in Perkins 2004, 121)

In these passages, Leibniz makes it clear that his criteria for what makes an interpretation "favorable" is its consistency with Christianity (not to mention that he often seeks out confirmation in the Chinese classics of his own philosophical theories). But by being above-board about the act of interpretation itself and the possibility of

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Leibniz's similar language in the *Novissima Sinica* preface: "As a general rule, nothing prevents us from thinking well of the ancient doctrines [of the Chinese] until we are compelled to proceed in other ways" (Cook & Rosemont 1994, 70).

distortion, Leibniz's writings on China give students the chance to critically reflect on their own hermeneutic standards and assumptions.

Despite his occasional (but again, at least *explicit*) interpretive appropriations, Leibniz is also admirably sensitive to the principle of charity, advocating Ricoeur's (1970) hermeneutics of faith rather than a hermeneutics of suspicion. He lays down the interpretive principle that foreign texts should not be *prima facie* construed in ways that would render them absurd, either to logic (*Discourse* 63) or to psychological realism (*Discourse* 64). If a text appears contradictory or false, one should shift to a more figurative reading (*Discourse* 33). And in general, interpretations should consider overall coherence and avoid taking things out of context: "To be able to speak clearly of their dogmas, it is safest to consider the reason and the harmony of their doctrines, rather than superficial utterances" (*Discourse* 34a).

Leibniz also makes an interesting case not merely for the *necessity* but also for the *advantages* of charitable outsiders seeking to interpret Chinese philosophy: "It is not absurd for discerning Europeans (such as Ricci) to see something today which is not adequately known by the Chinese erudites, and to be able to interpret their ancient books better than the erudites themselves... How often strangers have better insight into the histories and monuments of a nation than their own citizens!" (Cook & Rosemont 1994, 64). If an interpretation is erroneous but nevertheless well-intentioned and favorable, at the very least it can still be a constructive first step in cultural exchange, always with the possibility of later correction (cf. Perkins 2004, 163).

Finally, in the *Civil Cult of Confucius*, Leibniz gives an inspiring call to arms for Western philosophers to take the task of comparative Chinese philosophy more seriously. He writes, "As of now, I do not know if it is sufficiently clear what in fact is the authentic doctrine of the Chinese literati (especially the classical ones), officially approved, based on their classical texts. In any event, one can hardly evaluate it properly in Europe until Chinese literature is no less familiar than the Rabbinical or Arab, so that it is possible for us to read their books and judge them critically, something that could indeed be done in Christendom" (Cook & Rosemont 1994, 63).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Adopting the Historical Approach to confronting student biases in undergraduate and introductory courses in Chinese philosophy has advantages over alternate pedagogies. And Leibniz's writings on China are a very effective key—a propaedeutic *clavis sinica*—for interpretively unlocking Chinese primary sources. Leibniz communicates important and explicit hermeneutic principles, he shows students that comparative philosophy is core to the philosophical enterprise and the Western canon, and he models interpretations that students can see are both legitimate and illegitimate. In doing so, Leibniz is a wonderful segue into Chinese philosophy for Western students, helping them feel confident but careful in constructing and defending their own subsequent readings. As the Jesuit missionaries in China phrased it, this cultivates in students the ability to "talk something into harmony" (*shuohede*).

I have found the Historical Approach in general and Leibniz in particular very effective in my courses. Such an approach, however, does raise questions about under what conditions it is pedagogically undesirable to teach stereotypes. Many of the early modern European candidate texts (Leibniz included) express attitudes about China that are naive, quaint, or even downright offensive. For all the pedagogical advantages I have attributed to these texts, such outmoded interpretations and arguments require that an instructor work to establish a classroom culture of respect and critique.

Finally, although I have focused in the paper on using Leibniz to set up the curriculum in a Chinese philosophy course, such a Historical Approach might have equally effective analogs for other areas of world philosophy. Using the American Transcendentalists or Schopenhauer, for example, might furnish a similar propaedeutic “key” for a course on Indian philosophy. As with Leibniz’s writings on China and Ricci’s Impossible Black Tulip map, such texts distort while clarifying, enabling us to live Confucius’ injunction to learn from both good and bad models.

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