

THE WESTERN IMAGE
OF CHINESE RELIGION
FROM LEIBNIZ TO DE GROOT

It is not the purpose of this short essay to try the impossible and give an adequate historical survey of the Western image (or rather images) of China. There is, moreover, a vast literature on the subject to which both sinologists and historians of European culture have contributed. The following paragraphs will restrict themselves to two poles in this history: the perception and reception of China in the 17th century (with Leibniz as the most significant and impressive representative of the period)—in other words the image of China as current among the *philosophes* i.e., the pre-enlightenment, still Christian humanists, none of which was (or could have been) a sinologist properly speaking—and again at the end of the 19th century, when academic sinology began to get into stride. Without in any way detracting from the significance of his great predecessors and contemporaries, especially Marcel Granet, we shall limit our discussion to J.J.M. de Groot (Leiden and Berlin, d. 1921).

The 17th century, and under its influence the subsequent genera-

tions, were stamped by the “mandarin image” which the Jesuit missionaries had conveyed to, and imposed on, the West. Taoism was mentioned, if at all, rather condescendingly: it is the religion of the simple folk (Athanasius Kircher:... *respondet plebeis*), though here and there a voice could be heard which, as a sort of exception confirming the rule, suggested that even in the *Taote-king*, traces of a *lumen naturale* or of a primordial divine revelation might be detected. By and large the Confucian perspective remained constant either in a positive or in a negative sense. Positive: Confucianism as a culture of equal value and dignity with that of Europe. Negative: Confucianism as responsible for the “unhistorical” and “static” character of China (“a history without history” and “an eternal stagnation”—thus Hegel and Ranke), or, even worse, for the hopeless degeneration of Chinese civilisation. One of the most universal minds of the period, G.W. Leibniz, took a particularly lively interest—for a variety of reasons—in Chinese culture. His motivations were both philosophical-humanist (China as one of the noblest manifestations of civilisation) and religious (for his Christian missionary zeal was genuine and not merely a cloak for other, political or cultural, intentions). For that reason the German Lutheran Protestant Leibniz not only spoke of the *missiones sacrae* (sic) of the Catholic orders, but also took an active part, in his writings, in the so-called “Rites Controversy”. Here he sides very emphatically with the Jesuit approach to Chinese (= Confucian) culture which was not merely a high civilisation but also a supreme example of an actual, historical “natural religion” (unlike the usual concept of “natural religion” which was merely the figment of philosophers’ brains) and hence could be Christianised. It was definitely not a pagan, idolatrous religion as was claimed by the anti-Jesuit party (mainly Dominican and Franciscan missionaries) who, much to the regret of Leibniz and many others, triumphed in Rome. Leibniz’s final and mature views on the subject are set out in the treatise, written in French shortly before his death, *Discours sur la Théologie naturelle des Chinois* (1715).

Leibniz, as a philosopher of culture, was therefore primarily interested in divesting Confucianism of any specifically “religious” character it might have exhibited. In this sociocultural perspective (of course the term “culture” in its modern sense did not yet exist in Leibniz’s time) Confucianism (= China) is a culture equal in

value and dignity to that of Europe though totally different from it. It is precisely because of this diversity of expressions of the one *humanitas* that Confucianism is compatible with Christianity. Leibniz preaches a cultural, not a religious pluralism, and in this respect continues in the line of Nicolas of Cusa: *una religio* (i.e., Christianity) *in rituum varietate* (i.e., in the variety of cultural forms). Because China represents one of the most beautiful and advanced forms of “natural religion”, it is capable of absorbing the Christian truth and being perfected by it. On the level of civilisation these two “high cultures” can learn a great deal from each other.

Inspired by the reports of the Jesuit missionaries, Leibniz had arrived at what we might call a pre-decision. He was not concerned with the definitive interpretation of incomplete and inadequate data, but with the principle of not condemning prematurely the little material available and to give it the “benefit of the doubt” (in terms of Western, Christian criteria): the “ancient” Confucianism was essentially monotheistic, entertained a belief in souls (though not necessarily in deified ancestors), and the materialist and atheist statements in the texts merely showed that the neo-Confucians had forgotten their own venerable ancient truths. The politico-social character of Confucianism proved that it was in the first place a form of culture. Hence Leibniz could use, long before J.J. Rousseau and long before our modern sociologists, the term “civil religion” (as is shown by his little tract *De Confucii Cultu Civili* which I have edited with a detailed Preface and a French translation, in *Studia Leibnitiana* xvi, 1984, pp. 93-101).

The lasting influence of Leibniz is illustrated by the expulsion of his disciple Christian Wolff from the University of Halle because of his “un-Christian” praise of the *Sinarum philosophia practica* (1721) or by the publication of “A new and complete interpretation of the *Yekin*, bequeathed by the founder and first emperor of China” (1753) by the Royal Prussian Church and School’s inspector, Johann Thomas Haupt. Here we should remind ourselves that for Leibniz the real founder of Chinese (= Confucian) culture was not Confucius but the legendary emperor “Fohi” (i.e., Fu Hsi), and the most basic text, of very special interest also for Leibniz’s binary mathematics, was precisely the *Yekin* (i.e., *I. Ching*).

On one point Leibniz formulates a problem that has not yet found a satisfactory solution in the modern social sciences: to what extent is the researcher bound by the depositions and accounts of his informants? Can the “outsider” presume to know everything better and go, in his interpretations, beyond his informants? As a Christian, Leibniz had a classical example before his eyes: the Church understood the Old Testament better than the blind and unbelieving Jews. As a Protestant he also knew that true and correct understanding of the Gospels (falsified by the medieval Catholic Church) had to be rediscovered by the Reformation. Hence there was nothing extraordinary in the claim that Ricci’s *interpretatio christiana* of Confucianism was more valid than the *interpretatio sinica* advanced by the contemporary Chinese.

With J.J.M. de Groot (1854-1921) one of the founding fathers of modern sinology in general, and the study of Chinese religion in particular, everything is different. Moreover, this learned co-founder of modern academic sinology also exhibits an extremely interesting symptom of the utmost relevance to our theme. I am referring here to the rupture in de Groot’s image of China. Methodologically the tremendous progress of scholarship is obvious. De Groot works both as a philologist, dealing with classical and other texts, and as an ethnologist or ethnographer (the term “anthropologist” would sound slightly anachronistic in our generation) observing the religious practices of all strata of Chinese society. The early de Groot is in the line of his 17th-century predecessors. Even when Taoism and Buddhism are mentioned alongside of Confucianism, China is always spoken of with respect. In almost Voltaire-like fashion the humanistic-philosophical character of Chinese religion is emphasised, and the tolerance of Confucianism in particular and of the Chinese mentality in general highly praised. Buddhism is treated less respectfully because as a highly developed counter-church with its theology and doctrines, its masses for the dead, its rituals and its *de facto* hierarchical priesthood, it too much resembled the Catholic Church and hence provoked the hostility of the militantly anti-clerical ex-Catholic de Groot. Incidentally it was for very similar, though not identical, reasons that Confucianism was acceptable to the Jesuits whereas Taoism and Buddhism were the work of the devil. Even Leibniz could not help referring to “the unfortunate idol of the Buddha” that was imported into China from India. The puritanically-minded de Groot also

notes with evident satisfaction that orgies, tantric rituals and similar excesses were foreign to Chinese religion.

Of course we must bear in mind that academic sinology at the end of the 19th century had progressed far beyond the Jesuit analyses of the seventeenth. Much more was known about Taoism and Chinese Buddhism. Much more was also known of the complicated history of Confucianism and neo-Confucianism. And very much more was known not only about the discussions throughout Chinese history concerning *san chiao* (viz. *san-chiao-wei-i* or *han-san-wei-i*)—i.e., the relationship of the “three teachings”, a discussion still considered by many to have been a controversy among Chinese scholars only—but also about folk-religion, the latter perhaps an autonomous and specific form of religion and not merely a degenerate “high religion”.

To this should be added de Groot’s integral overview, as indicated by the title of his grandly conceived (though the actual execution may be termed a failure) *The Religious System of the Chinese*. The first volume of this multi-volume torso appeared in 1892, but the thing to be noted is the singular in the title. De Groot speaks almost aggressively of “Confucian Taoism” and “Taoist Confucianism” as interchangeable synonyms. Finally he coins the term “universism” as a designation of the essence of all forms of Chinese religion: it is the trunk of which all forms of religion, including the Chinese transformation of Buddhism, are but branches.

Here a decisive breakthrough seems to have taken place. De Groot sought and found the “system”, Chinese religion in the singular. Of course de Groot’s use of the word system is different from that of modern “system analysis”. What mattered to him was the integral unity of cultural phenomena. When a more recent author (Ph. Ch. Baity, *Religion in a Chinese Town*, 1975, pp. 55) tells us—almost a century after de Groot—rather solemnly that specialist researches “tell us little of the overall system. That such a system must exist can be inferred from...” or “I feel that many studies of religion in Chinese society have ignored the most fundamental character of the religion which is its systematic and unitary nature...” then this is pretty old stuff. Compare e.g., de Groot’s diary entry of 9 June, 1886 (my translation from the original Dutch):

I am beginning a life of uninterrupted collecting of data in the

most diverse areas: observing and noting down peculiarities regarding family life, (and to this end I frequently live with Chinese families), laws of inheritance, adoption, the position of women, marriages, rites of the dead etc. What wealth of possibilities is within reach of hand in this unknown land! I participate at almost every festival of the population and am taking notes. It does not take very long and I discover *the thread that passes through it all* (my italics. RJZW)—and almost everything becomes lucid and clear as glass. At last I can begin to work *systematically* (underlined by de Groot), and each part of this system of mores and customs is but part of a total whole.

But it is not only the “mores and customs” observable from outside that preoccupy de Groot. His frequent stays in Buddhist monasteries in the interior attempt to solve the question “which so far scholarship has not answered: what exactly are the monks doing? What goal are they pursuing and what means do they use to reach this goal?”.

At this juncture a brief word should be said about the so-called “diary” of de Groot from which so much light is expected by sinologists and anthropologists. The nicely bound folio volume (in my possession) carries the German title *Notizen über mein Leben* and the Dutch subtitle *Een Familiestuk*. The text is in Dutch and was apparently written by de Groot towards the end of his life on the basis of notes made throughout the years. The handwriting is uniform and similar throughout; only the last pages betray the trembling hand of a sick man marked by death. The existence of this “family document” has been known for a long time, since it is mentioned in the obituary notice of M.N. de Visser (30 November, 1921) as being in the possession of the author’s sister, Miss C.N.M. de Groot. It was indeed from the family that the late lamented Prof. Maurice Freedman (Professor of Social Anthropology in the University of Oxford and Fellow of All Souls College, d. 1975) obtained the ms. through the intermediary of Dutch friends and colleagues. (I “inherited” the diary after Freedman’s sudden and premature death, through the kindness of his widow, Dr. Judith Freedman). The trouble with this ms. is that apart from some incidental valuable information, it contains much unimportant material exhibiting de Groot’s desire of and pleasure in honours and recognition. For sinologists interested in de Groot’s scholarly

biography it is a disappointment. The disappointment is increased by the fact that we learn from this “family document” that de Groot did indeed keep a real diary which, however, he destroyed. Thus he notes, towards the end of 1877:

My diary covering this whole year of greatest efforts, work and even danger of life (!) I have destroyed after extracting from it whatever may be of scientific value... This manner [of keeping diaries] has after all as its sole aim to render the authors and their adventures interesting.

He even mentions the offers of publishers to publish his diaries as well as his refusal of these offers. Towards the end of 1882 there is a similar entry:

Have burnt the diary concerning this period, exactly as the previous one. Intimate matters of life, also concerning friends and relatives, should be engraved in the heart. When the heart has stopped beating, these memories should be consigned to oblivion together with the heart! The mere idea that my feelings concerning relations [with] friends and relatives could risk to come under the eyes of third parties is sacrilegious.

Between the years 1886-1891, however, de Groot's work exhibits a curious rupture. The Leibnizian thread of Sinophily breaks off, and with the arrogance of a European of the period de Groot now describes China as the very incarnation of superstition, primitiveness, lack of religion, backwardness and stupidity. Those who extol true religion and rationalists who oppose all religion can now meet in a fraternal embrace in their evaluation and condemnation of China. Even worse than that, compared to the blood-thirsty intolerance of Confucianism even the Holy Inquisition seems like an innocent orphan child. The sworn anticlericalist enemy of Catholicism dedicates his *Sectarianism and Religious Persecution in China* (1903) to “all missionaries of all Christian denominations labouring in China” as the exclusive bearers of civilisation and as the mediators of at least the possibility of genuine religion and humanitarianism in this backward, miserable and unhappy country.

This drastic change has been noted by Freedman and, following

him, by de Beauclair and Molé. It would, however, be a bad mistake to interpret this change simply as European arrogance. The explanation is much simpler. The great English sinologist Arthur Waley never travelled to China lest his dream be shattered by reality. De Groot, doing field-work in China, was denied this option. A very instructive entry of April-May 1889 has this to say:

Although my stay in China is extremely attractive for me because of the treasure of data that I collect and that grows every day, in the long run this life of exile in the dirtiest country of the world, where nothing is ever cleaned, which literally spreads stench in all directions, where you slave away and travel in the cold in winter and in unbearable heat in the summer, where privation, hard work and insufficient nourishment are my daily lot—this life begins to become unbearable. In the interior I have to be on my guard all the time and against everybody, since hostile attacks are hanging over the head of every foreigner like a sword of Damocles. The result is that you are filled with an unconquerable disgust of the population.

It is unnecessary to point out that at that time China had sunk to a low that was unique even in its long history.

It was a period of increasing weakness and decomposition due to the intrusion of the Western colonial powers from outside and to corruption and degeneracy inside. The last years of the Manchu period were very different from the glorious (or glorified) reign of the Kang Hsi Emperor. The passionate anti-Confucianism of de Groot seems to be troubling because so Western and arrogant. But this should not make us forget (as did so many “experts” analysing the anti-Confucian crusade during the Cultural Revolution), that since the beginning of this century anti-Confucianism was a necessary element of every Chinese effort at reform and renewal. Confucius was the black sheep, for progressive Chinese even more than for Western observers. It is impossible to understand the Sun-Yatsen Revolution without analysing the two first anti-Confucian waves (1911 and 1919). Wu Yü (1916) described Confucianism as a “cannibalistic machinery”, and in his Preface to a revised edition of the *Wu Yü Wen Lu* (1936) no less an authority than Hu Shi (though Otto Franke said of him that one could never be sure whether or not he meant to be taken seriously) wrote:

For two thousand years the sign-board of Confucius has decorated this cannibalistic ritual system. This sign-board—no matter whether of a genuine shop or of a fraudulent firm—must be pulled down, smashed into smithereens, and burned.

No doubt de Groot would gladly have said “Amen” to this confirmation of his views by eminent Chinese. Perhaps it may be a good thing that the “new neo-Confucianism” is re-entering the stage. But Chinese literature from the beginning of this century should prevent us from condemning, hastily and through ignorance of the state of affairs in China, de Groot’s work after 1890 and especially his *Sectarianism* (1903).

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