

**DOES “LI” HAVE A PARALLELISM WITH  
LEIBNIZIAN CONCEPT OF SPIRITUAL SUBSTANCE?**

**Cristina Bertrand**

## Outline

### I. Introduction

1. Sources of Leibniz' knowledge of China
2. Purpose and Structure of the Discourse on the natural theology of the Chinese

### II. Correlation between Li and Spiritual Substance

1. Introduction
2. Concept of Li
3. Attributes of Li
4. Leibniz' reply to Father Longobardi

### III. Conclusion

Abstract

There are many similarities between Leibniz' philosophy and Chinese thought, most notably those found in the Book of Changes or I Ching. These similarities are: The concept of monad and Li; the binary arithmetic and the hexagrams of that book; the idea of considering physics and ethics as sciences of quality; the notion of force and, finally, Leibniz' belief that monad is the link between physics and metaphysics. It follows from this last argument that the natural world is merged with the moral world, and from understanding the first we are able to behave correctly. Because the key concept of this unity is the monad, the purpose of this work is to show the similarities between Li and the Leibnizian concept of spiritual substance.

## I. Introduction

Many theories have been suggested to explain the interrelation between Leibniz' philosophy and Chinese thought. Could these similarities be explained by diffusion of ideas, mere coincidence, similarity of external conditions, a similar interior human structure, or do they have another origin?

Leibniz himself answers this question saying that this correspondence is the result of his view of truth being universal and its validity. He adds that universal law, through which God is manifested, is "engraved in our hearts"; therefore, there is a universal truth, which can be reached by all men.

It is well known that Leibniz studies Chinese civilization throughout his adult life and that he maintained correspondence with the most knowledgeable European thinkers of his day on the subject. Moreover, in the last year of his life he wrote a long letter to Nicholas de Remond who had previously asked his opinion of two works on Chinese religion written by Catholic missionaries.<sup>1</sup> Leibniz called his answer "Discours sur la Theologie naturelle des Chinois."<sup>2</sup> It is necessary to point out that the letter referred to was written by Leibniz at the age of 70; therefore, it is a work of maturity.

To answer the question of why this work was not translated for two and a half centuries it will be necessary to consider many factors. The Discourse contains some mistakes whose roots lie not in Leibniz' understanding of Chinese thought but rather the missionaries' writings. Furthermore, the Discourse was written in French, a language not common to research scholars. Transcription of Chinese signs by Leibniz and the calligraphy of the text itself are important reason, too. But there is also another fundamental reason for the neglect of the Discourse: an excess of self-reliance of occidental philosophers who did not like to believe that an oriental civilization could

---

<sup>1</sup> The Jesuit Nicholas Longobardi and the Franciscan Antoine de Saint-Marie.

<sup>2</sup> G.W. Leibniz, Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese, (Hawaii: The University Press, Monograph of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy no. 4, 1977).

surpass them either in philosophy or in morality. Certainly, the following statement by Leibniz was not much appreciated in his time:

[I]f we are their equals in the industrial arts, and ahead of them in contemplative sciences, certainly they surpass us (though it is almost shameful to admit this) in practical philosophy, that is, in the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life and use of mortals.<sup>1</sup>

The Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese is, thus, a fundamental key in understanding not only Chinese but also Leibniz' philosophy, and it must be considered in accordance with his will, a wide and deep knowledge, as well as his profound respect for all beliefs and persons.

1. Sources of Leibniz' knowledge of China. Leibniz' knowledge about China came principally from the works of five catholic missionaries: the Jesuits Claudio Grimaldi (1638-1712), Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), Nicholas Longobardi (1565-1655), Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730) and the Franciscan Antoine de Saint-Marie (1602-1669). Although Leibniz had knowledge about Chinese civilization, his interest became deeper when he met Grimaldi in Rome. From then on, they established a constant correspondence based on Leibniz' strong interest. He thought that Europe could learn from China resulting in a closer cooperation and understanding between both cultures.

Another important source of materials was Ricci's writings. Although Ricci died before Leibniz was born, his work was very appreciated by the latter because his "accommodationist" position. In his work On the Propagation of Christianity Among the Chinese, Ricci demonstrated not only a deep understanding of Chinese customs, rituals and traditions but also a belief in the accommodation of this culture with Christianity. The "accommodationist" position is, in Ricci's words: "Tolerance for their ancient writings, their ritual observances and practice of ancestor worship, incorporating all of

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.2

these into the Christian faith in China."<sup>1</sup> Leibniz's belief was always very close to this position because of his searching for a universal religion.

Against this position was, on the other hand, the Father Longobardi<sup>2</sup> who succeeded Ricci as the head of the China Mission. Longobardi believed that the ancient Chinese were materialists; therefore, the conversion to Christianity required the renunciation of all their beliefs. This, too, was the position of the Spanish Franciscan Antonio Caballero, referred by Leibniz as Antoine de Saint-Marie. His text, *Traite sur quelques points importants de la Mission de la Chine*, thereafter *Mission Treatise*, was the second text sent to Leibniz by Remond. Saint-Marie advocated a total renunciation of China's tradition as a necessary condition for Christian conversion. Therefore, Leibniz' critics were more attracted to these ideas than those of Longobardi.

In both cases, Leibniz demonstrated with pondered arguments that these missionaries had not understood Chinese ancient philosophy. He pointed out in many occasions the impossibility of understanding other cultures or civilizations through prejudices like the desire to convert everyone to Christianity. This desire to convert, when it is not accompanied by respect for the beliefs of other persons, represents a grave danger for the target community.

The last of the missionaries who strongly influenced Leibniz' understanding of Chinese thoughts was Joachim Bouvet. His writing, "Historical Portrait of the Emperor of China", was included in the second edition of *Novissima Sinica*, a catalog of current events issued in 1697 and again in 1699. The correspondence between the two took place from 1698 to 1703, in part due to Bouvet's original ideas and also because his ideas were philosophical and without prejudice.

Three of Bouvet's original ideas were reflected in Leibniz' Discourse and they exerted a strong influence over Leibniz. The first of them was Bouvet's belief that the notation exemplified in the basic trigrams of the I Ching constitutes the key to all

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.11

<sup>2</sup> His Religion Treatise was one of the two works sent to Leibniz by Remond.

sciences. Second, the surprising similarity between the trigrams of the I Ching and Leibniz' binary arithmetic, a relation which Leibniz not only recognized but also wrote about in the last part of the Discourse. This relation was so important for Leibniz precisely because he had always argued for the union between science, philosophy and religion:

Leibniz' excitement at Bouvet's letter describing the parallels can easily be imagined, for the philosopher held firmly throughout his life the belief that reason was all-persuasive, and if used by everyone, would eventually bring everyone to the true faith, i.e., Christianity. By thinking that the Chinese of 4500 years ago possessed a mathematical notion similar to his own --which was useful for the exemplification of the principles of reason-- Leibniz not only found support for his arguments that ancient Chinese had natural religion, but he was also able to believe, thanks to his faith in reason, that the conversion of the Chinese would proceed apace once it was demonstrated to them that later generations had simply lost the true principles set down by Fu Hsi.<sup>1</sup>

The other original idea that Leibniz took into consideration in his Discourse was Bouvet's belief in considering Fu Hsi<sup>2</sup> as a manifestation of the "Lawgiver"; that is, like Hermes Trismegistus in the West. This belief came from the relationship Bouvet found 'between the Chinese language, the hieroglyphs of the Egyptians and ancient Hebrew. However, this part was not developed further because the correspondence between Leibniz and Bouvet stopped at this point.

---

<sup>1</sup> G.W. Leibniz, Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese, (Hawaii: the University Press, 1977) p. 15

<sup>2</sup> Fu Hsi is considered to be one of the legendary rulers of China and the author of the trigrams of the I Ching.

In conclusion, Leibniz' claim was always to understand in depth Chinese civilization and thought, to consider of fundamental importance the, trignms of the I Ching as the basis of all sciences and, finally, to try to integrate Christian faith in Chinese people without forcing them to abandon their own beliefs and practices. For this reason, his Discourse constitutes a strong reply to the Longobardi and Saint-Marie writings while constituting an exposition of his own philosophy.

2. Purpose and Structure of the Discourse. As we have seen, the Discourse was Leibniz' critique of the theories advocated by Longobardi in the Religion Treatise and Saint-Marie in Mission Treatise. These missionaries believed that ancient Chinese thinkers were materialists, and there were no resemblances at all between Christian theology and Chinese thought. The three most important issues on which they based their beliefs addressed the nature of God and spiritual substances, the existence and qualities of spirits and matter, and the immortality of the human soul. Their conclusion conducted them to pursue the conversion through the extirpation of all thought divergent from Christian faith. Leibniz' Discourse is a systematic attempt to develop the philosophical arguments against these points of view.

The Discourse has four sections, each one dealing with a particular aspect of Chinese philosophy. In each section Leibniz presents arguments against the aforementioned missionaries, but he also points out his own philosophy and the interrelation between Chinese and Christian beliefs. In the first part, he analyzes the Christian concept of God and the underlying concept of spiritual substance in Li. The second part deals with the correlation between matter and spirit in China and matter and angels in Christianity. The argumentative line that Leibniz proposes is based on three logical statements. First, in comparing Chinese philosophy with his own, he states that they are compatible. Second, he establishes the orthodoxy of his philosophy with Christian faith. And, finally, following the logical rule that if two things are similar to a third the original two must be similar, he concludes that Chinese thought is compatible with Christianity.



The third part of the Discourse is destined to point out also the similarities between the human soul and Chinese conception of spirits. Even though the fourth part is the least extended, it constitutes one of Leibniz' fundamental arguments in favor of the understanding of not only Chinese culture but also all fundamentals of science: "The I Ching is one such book, according to him, and if we read it carefully, what we will uncover is the fact that 'the ancient Chinese have surpassed the modern ones in the extreme, not only in piety... but in science as well.'"<sup>1</sup> It is very important to mention this statement because the scientific argument has always been used to show the inferiority of the Chinese culture. As Leibniz argues in the last part of the Discourse, the fact that the Chinese have not developed science in the same way as the Occidentals does not mean that they do know about binary arithmetic exposed through the trigrams of the I Ching.

## II. Correlation between "Li" and Spiritual Substance

1. Introduction. Leibniz begins this part of the Discourse with the statement that the ancient Chinese thought makes sense. He states also that the opinion of some modern writers about the validity of these thoughts should not be considered the only possible opinion, in the same way that not all Christians are obliged to follow the Scholastic doctrines. Certainly, many of these Chinese thoughts have paradoxical or ambivalent meanings but a closer look can make them understandable.

There is controverted the fact that Chinese recognize spiritual substances. Leibniz believes that they did although there is no strict separation between these substances and matter. It is true that some Chinese have considered God joined to matter, but a careful study about the attributes of Li can show us how the First Principle produces Ki or matter; therefore, it comes first and is superior to, and different from, matter. The preceding opinion, that God and matter are the same comes from the fact that the Chinese attribute to physical elements same kind of spiritual power. However, they do not have this power by themselves but represent the manifestation of God through them.

---

<sup>1</sup> G.W. Leibniz, Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese, (Hawaii: The University Press, 1977) p.37

Leibniz finishes his introduction with the assertion that China is a great Empire that surpasses Europe not only in population and orderly government but also in morality. For this reason, the first condition to understand its philosophy is through a respectful approach. European thinkers have tended to neglect all kinds of thoughts, which did not agree with scholastic notions. To understand a different culture or civilization it is necessary to consider all its manifestations without prejudice. Leibniz himself tried to accomplish this goal in his study of Chinese philosophy.

2. Concept of Li. "The first principle of the Chinese is called Li, that is Reason, or the foundation of all nature, the most universal reason and substance; there is nothing greater nor better than Li. This great and universal cause is pure, motionless, rarefied, without body or shape, and can be comprehended only through the understanding."<sup>1</sup> de Saint-Marie, even though he wrote against Chinese doctrine, recognized Li as Law and universal Order and even the origin of all things created. Father Lucena<sup>2</sup>, on the other hand, stated that Li is a principle of sufficiency; therefore, it is the ultimate cause of the world. "It gives stability to the earth; it endows all species with the ability to reproduce their kind, this virtue not being in the nature of the things themselves and not depending at all upon them but consisting and residing in this Li. It has dominion over all; it is present in all things, governing and producing all as absolute master of Heaven and Earth."<sup>3</sup>

As we have seen, one cannot doubt the priority and power of Li. Moreover, one cannot doubt its creative principle. We have now to point out its qualities or properties.

3. Attributes of Li. Leibniz follows the compilation of qualities of Li written by Father Longobardi. Li is the Being, the Substance and the Entity. This substance is infinite, eternal, uncreated, incorruptible and without beginning or end. It is also the principle of Heaven and Earth and the moral principle. It is the Supreme, the Summary

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 60

<sup>2</sup> Fr. Joao de Lucena, S.J. (1548-1600), an early biographer of St. Francis Xavier.

<sup>3</sup> G.W. Leibniz, Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese, (Hawaii: The University Press, 1977) p. 73

Unity, not capable of divisibility but, at the same time, the most perfect multiplicity. It is the Grand Void and the sovereign plenitude. Subsequently, Leibniz asks:

After all this, why not simply say that the Li is our God? That is, the ultimate, or if you wish, the primary ground of Existence and even of the possibility of things; the source of all good which is in things, the primary intelligence which was called by Anaxagoras and other ancient Greeks and Latins, NOUS, Mens.<sup>1</sup>

The Chinese also call Li a globe or circle, a notion that is in accordance with the consideration of God as a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. They call Li the Nature of things, in the same way as the scholastic notion of *Natura Naturans*. They also attribute to Li the wisdom, truth and goodness. In general, they attribute to Li all manner of perfections using the affirmative and negative method that Christian theology does. However, it is not the opinion of Father Longobardi. His opinion, on which is based Leibniz' criticism is the following:

I imagine (he says) that someone could believe that the Li is our God because one ascribes to it those qualities and perfections, which are appropriate only to God. However, do not let yourself be dazzled by these specious names under which a poisonous doctrine is hidden. For if you penetrate to the very heart of the matter, to its very root, you will see that this Li is nothing other than our prime Matter. The proof of this is that on one hand they ascribe to it grand imperfections as our philosophers do with respect to prime Matter.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.62

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 67

Obviously Leibniz disagrees with this opinion and his arguments constitute one of the most important sections of the Discourse.

4. Leibniz' reply to Father Longobardi. One of the most important concerns of Leibniz in his understanding Chinese philosophy is to carefully examine the apparent contradiction of their writings. A paradoxical way of expression can be misunderstood if one is not able to suspend judgment and see if the writings can be interpreted in more than one way. He points out that Longobardi looks only at sane meanings and he does not want to examine others. Consequently, looking only to the aspects that deals with matter, he forgets to see all the definitions linked with the spiritual principle. Leibniz argues that it is impossible to consider only matter something that is the origin of activity and order of all forms. Therefore, it is totally inappropriate to equate the Chinese Li with primary matter.

Another argument of Longobardi is that Li cannot subsist by itself and it has need of primal air. Leibniz thinks exists an interpretative mistake here because of the confusion of levels between activity and expression. The first is the property of Li, the second is the manifestation of Li through phenomena. Another argument lies in considering Li inanimate, without design and without intelligence. Leibniz argues that the Chinese deny Li life as animation of organs, the knowledge acquired by reasoning or experience and the human power. How, thus, can it be understood if we ascribe to Li the greatest perfection?

Longobardi also argues that Li does not have a will; therefore, the deliberation does not form part of Li. He exposes that Li produces the primal air contingently; the air produces heat and that produces Heaven and Earth. The laws with which Li governs are not intelligent but natural. Longobardi bases his arguments on one sentence that describes the action of Li saying that Li has no knowledge but acts as if it has. Leibniz goes beyond the strict meaning of words and its paradoxical appearance. In saying that Li does not have intelligence the Chinese mean that Li does not possess the same kind of intelligence that human beings possess, because Li is the Supreme Knowledge; therefore, it does not have the necessity of intelligence to apprehend anything. To the argument that Li does

not have a free will Leibniz opposes the fact that, Li being the Order or Supreme Reason, it has chosen a model of the world instead of a different world. Therefore, it has created the world by a voluntary action.

The supposition of Longobardi that for the Chinese all things in the world are material is strongly refuted by Leibniz who bases his belief on the exposed properties of Li. "But I believe (as I have already said) that the Chinese recognize no distinct immaterial substance other than the Li which has produced Matter."<sup>1</sup> He adds to this belief the argument of the spirituality of souls that never perish even after death. Therefore, how can the matter be immortal?

To stronger support the materialistic argument, Longobardi often mentions the Chinese axiom that "all things are one." Leibniz noted, at this point, another Chinese axiom: "the one is all." It means that God is everything by eminence and He is not an aggregate of all things. He explains this as follows:

All things are composed of the same prime matter, which differs only by the form which motions gives it. Also, all things are active and possess Entelechies, Spirit and Souls only by virtue of the participation of Li, i.e., the same originative Spirit (God), which gives them all their perfections. And matter itself is only a production of this same primary cause. Thus everything emanates from it as from a central point. But it does not follow from this that all things are different only by virtue of accidental qualities: as, for example, the Epicureans and other materialists believed, admitting only matter, figure and movement, which would truly lead to the destruction of immaterial substances, or Entelechies, Souls and Spirits.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 87

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 88

Leibniz explains the relation between Matter and God as a process of creation. Even though he does not find an explicit text about this process, he states that the Chinese are not Spinozian, that is, they do not derive matter by emanation. Nevertheless "Ainsi je crois qu'on peut soutenir, sans choquer les auteurs classiques, qu'il y a des esprits tels que celui de l'homme ou des Genies, qui sont des substances differentes du Li, quoiqu'ils en emanent."<sup>1</sup>

What are the things created by God? From Li primitive air or Ki is issued. Longobardi himself affirms that Ki is a production of Li and one can ask, at this point: how is it possible to create without acting? Therefore, if Ki is only the instrument it is necessary to add that its virtue or efficient cause is Li. This belief brings Chinese philosophy closer to Christian theology because Matter is created by the primitive Form, by pure Activity and by the operation of God.

The doctrine of the Chinese on Spirits is explicit enough not to be misunderstood. To the question if the spirits are made from air, they answer that they are not the air but the force, the power and the activity in the air. They also distinguish between good spirits that produce beneficial effects in the physical elements and obscure spirits that produce negative effects. To prove that Chinese believe in such spirits Leibniz refers to the sacrifice made by the Emperor to Heaven and Earth, the sacrifices that nobility or heroes made to the great rivers and grand mountains. Leibniz points out: "If we say that nothing comes to receive what is offered, then to whom are we sacrificing?"<sup>2</sup>

Longobardi thinks that this veneration to the spirits could be considered, in a certain way, as idolatry. But Leibniz argues that Christian theology also believes in angels, that is, intelligent spirits who serve God in the government of the world. The sacrifice made by the Chinese to their ancestors should be considered as an intermediate step in reaching the Supreme Spirit and the universal Lord of Heaven and Earth.

---

<sup>1</sup> Oliver Roy, Leibniz et la Chine (Paris: J. Vrin, 1972) p 93

<sup>2</sup> G.W. Leibniz Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese, (Hawaii: The University Press, 1977) p.134

As we have seen, all of the Chinese arguments conclude in the affirmation of the existence of spiritual substances and all of them express an exact parallelism with the Leibniz' theory of monads. "Leibniz calls the monad 'a diminutive divinity, and material universe eminently. God as an ectype and this universe as a prototype (since the intelligible is the source of the sensible in relation to the primitive intelligence, the source of all things).! The monad is then "The first quasi-Nothing, ascending from nothing [of the infinitely divisible matter] to things, since it is the simplest, as it is also the last quasi-All, descending from the multitude of things towards Nothing."<sup>1</sup>

Besides the First Principle and the subaltern spirits, Leibniz deals in his Discourse with the human soul and its immortality. The Chinese believe that the death of man is only the separation of his elements. To describe the death of a man, the Chinese used to say "he has risen and descended" which means that his soul rises to Heaven and the body descends to the earth. On some occasions Chinese scholars regard men, especially great men, as angels incarnated. Father de Saint-Marie reports that the Chinese believe in Confucius and sage kings as an incarnation of God. Leibniz opposes this because his belief is that human souls have an inferior degree to the Supreme Spirit. Therefore, human souls cannot be considered part of Li but its creation.

This concept is enlightened by the belief in the reward and punishment after life. Father de Saint-Marie makes mention of the Chinese thought about ancient kings, who, after their death, rise to Heaven to thereafter assist and serve as intermediaries between Heaven and earth. It is true that the Chinese scholars do not speak either of Hell or purgatory, but there are many reasons to believe that some tasks done by spirits were a sort of purgatory. These souls had to accomplish different obligations before they were able to have their place in the Heaven.

Leibniz' last argument about justice after death comes and is derived from assigning God all virtues. It is, thus, a logic argument:

But perhaps they will not always ridicule it if they consider that this supreme substance --which on their own grounds

---

<sup>1</sup> A.T. Tymieniecka, Leibniz' cosmological synthesis (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1964) p.163

is the source of wisdom and justice-- could not act less perfectly on the spirits and the souls which it creates, than a wise king in his realm acts upon his subjects whom he did not create of his own will, and whom it is more difficult for him to govern since they do not depend upon him absolutely. Thus this Kingdom of the Spirits under this great Master cannot be less orderly than a Kingdom of men, and consequently it follows that virtue should be rewarded and vice punished under this governance, justice being insufficiently done in this life.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> G.W. Leibniz, Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese, Hawaii" The University Press, 1977) p.153



### III. Conclusion

As we have seen throughout this work, Leibniz firmly believes in the concordance between Western and ancient Chinese philosophy. These concordances are ordered around three fundamental subjects: the logical and mathematical principles of science, the spiritual substances and the immortality of the soul associated with justice after death.

Related to the first subject Leibniz believes in the total analogy between the trigrams of the I Ching and his binary mathematics. He also believes in ethics and physics as sciences of quality and claimed them for universal rules of behavior. These rules can be deduced from the natural world and they are according not only to Christianity but also with all religions in the world.

The second subject that Leibniz deals with in depth in the Discourse is the study of Li as a spiritual substance. Leibniz was totally explicit in pointing out the correlation between Li and his theory of monads. There is the same relationship between Li and phenomena and between monads and phenomena. Moreover, the intermediaries between both are the Chinese concept of Ch'i and his own of "vis viva." The metaphysical connection between Li or monads and phenomena is part of an organic whole without separable parts. At the same time the kind of connection between both is accomplished through a mirroring process, which explains the interconnectedness of material and spiritual substances. Li and the monads are rational principles with logical priority toward phenomenical representation. Both of them are created by the First Substance, that is, T'ai-chi or God.

The notion of an ethereal soul is almost the same in Chinese culture and Christian belief. It is also parallel to the belief in a justice after death, which demonstrates that the Chinese concept of soul is spiritual because it is impossible to consider matter immortal. Therefore, this argument demonstrates without a doubt that they believe in spiritual substances.

Even though Leibniz' effort to understand Chinese culture, his philosophy about Chinese thought has been almost unknown until this time. However there are some

thinkers now concerned with a deep study of ancient Chinese philosophy. The most important thing for a philosopher is to face all kinds of questions without prejudice and certainly Leibniz exemplified this with his own work and life. As a conclusion:

The technological superiority of the modern West convinced the nineteenth and twentieth-century missionaries that it was more important to bring "superior" Western religious and cultural forms to the Chinese than to attempt to understand China. In order to go forward, we will have to, in our own age, be at least as observant as Ricci, Bouvet and Leibniz. In spite of their faults and errors, what these men did accomplish was motivated by deep religious and moral beliefs. To advance from where they left off, our beliefs in 'something' will have to be at least as deep as the beliefs of these failed seekers of accord.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> D.E. Mungello, Leibniz and Confucianism, the search for accord, (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1977) p.146