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# *The Outsider Perspective: Classical Chinese Philosophy in the Narrative Framework of the European Enlightenment*

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to enhance the understanding of how Classical Chinese Philosophy has been interpreted and transferred by Enlightenment thinkers into the narrative framework of European philosophy as a far-reaching source of ideas and inspiration with a driving force for promoting modern European social change. We examine outsider perspectives within the context of Enlightenment thinking that contributed to advances in the cross-cultural understanding of how Chinese stories could be disseminated in the framework of East-West dialogue.

**Keywords:** Classical Chinese Philosophy, the narrative framework of the European Enlightenment, humanism, rationalism, liberalism, secularism, Eurocentrism, cross-culture

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## Introduction

The European Enlightenment in the 18th century drew inspiration from Classical Chinese philosophy that contributed to the transformation of the Western world into a modern society and also influenced the rise and development of today's Sinology. However, there has been only limited study on how Enlightenment scholars integrated classical Chinese ideas into their evolving mindsets thus improving their understanding of human conditions and the promotion of social progress (Jonathan, 2013; Dawid, 2018). Demonstrating how the ideological dimensions of Western theoretical traditions have been adopted to interpret Oriental classical theories offers profound theoretical significance for deepening the understanding of the cross-cultural communication of Chinese stories in the East-West dialogue.

## Historical Context

In the second half of the 17th century and the 18th century, European capitalism began to emerge and develop, and Enlightenment thinkers felt an urgent need to abandon the medieval ideological traditions supported by theology. They wanted to bring about social changes by promoting humanism, rationalism, and liberalism, and to better understand human conditions and effectuate secularization. To foster the development of European industrial civilization, the separation of church and state was therefore highlighted. The strong religious overtones in ancient Greek and Roman intellectual traditions, and the traditional philosophical conceptual framework rooted in Europe at the time were not adequate to meet the new needs of Enlightenment development. Therefore, it was necessary to look for ideas and inspirations from a wider perspective, outside the limited scope of Europe (Dawid, 2018). It was at this time that classical Chinese philosophy became a significant component of the communications between European philosophy and Chinese thought. Therefore, it is necessary to look for inspirational resources outside Europe from a broad perspective. Classical Chinese philosophy provided a particularly significant means for the Western discovery of China. As John Marenbon stated, in the field of intellectual history, the discovery of China during the 17th and 18th centuries was no less important for the inception of modern Europe than the discovery of America in the 16th century (Dawid, 2018).

In the 16th and 17th centuries, Christian missionaries returned to Europe with large quantities of classical Chinese texts and Enlightenment thinkers were profoundly influenced by the philosophies embedded in these writings, many of which were promptly translated and published. For example, *The General History of China* edited by Jean-Baptiste Du Halde (1674-1743), one of the representative examples of the compilations and translations of ancient Chinese classics that included such works as: *Zhu Xi*, the *Book of Changes (Yijing)*, the *Book of Documents (Shujing)*, the *Classic of Poetry (Shijing)*, *Great Learning (Daxue)*, *Doctrine of the Mean*

(*Zhongyong*), and the *Analects (Lunyu)*. These compilations provided an almost encyclopedic coverage of classical Chinese texts (Dawid, 2018). Although Europeans at that time lacked a concrete understanding of China, from these works, the main spirit of Chinese philosophy had become available to Enlightenment scholars (Jonathan, 2013) who adopted and utilized the perspectives of classical Chinese philosophy as a source to tell a Chinese story tailored to meet the needs and terms of the European Enlightenment.

### **Traditional Western Theoretical Dimensions of Interpreting Foreign Ideas**

Among the different versions of the European Enlightenment in thoughts, appeals, introspections and criticisms, there are at least four main theoretical dimensions that play a key role in guiding Enlightenment thinkers to interpret foreign ideas as outside “the other.”

#### **The Dimension of Humanism**

As reviewed in the mainstream resources (e.g. Stanislav, 2018; Bullock, 2012; Dawid, 2018), Enlightenment thinkers were keenly aware that the Confucius thoughts explained in the representative works of Chinese Confucius philosophy such as the *Analects (LunYu)*, *Great Learning (DaXue)* and *Doctrine of the Mean (ZhongYong)* were purely derived from natural reason. In accordance with Confucian ideas, it might be said that the morality of Confucius is infinitely sublime yet still simple, reasonable, and derived from the purest sources of natural reason. Surely, never had a mind lacking the light of divine revelation appeared and developed a philosophy with such force and significance as Confucian philosophy. From the perspective of humanism during the Enlightenment period, these ideas not only shaped and fostered the Chinese Confucian culture, which is devoid of religious elements, but also stressed the value of humans as the first ruler of the world with its emphasis on benevolence and humaneness. The Enlightenment thinkers gave high recognition to the Confucian idea that the utmost happiness of mankind lies in the perfection of natural reason, viewing Confucian philosophy as a model for human thought.

As a leading figure of the French Enlightenment, François Arouet de Voltaire (1694-1778) wrote in *An Essay on Universal History, the Manners, and Spirit of Nations*, that Confucianism has a typical humanistic tendency and treats people’s achievements and interests with a human-oriented attitude, instead of judging them by theological criteria (Sweetman, 1999). From Voltaire’s perspective, Confucian ethics embody the view that mankind is the center of the universe and that the most essential discipline in China is ethics. For Chinese people, the things that are most profoundly understood, carefully cultivated, and being constantly improved are morality and law (Voltaire, 1999, 2016). Gottfried W. Leibniz, a prominent German mathematician and natural philosopher, spoke highly of Chinese ethics as well. In his eyes, China had not only admirable standards of morality, but also naturalistic philosophers. Leibniz

once argued that none of the Europeans believed that there was a better way than Chinese ethics to guide human beings to live in the world, and that although Germans regarded themselves as the most advanced nation, now China, an Eastern country, had enlightened them (Temple, 1963). Francois Quesnay (1694-1774), a French physician who had laid the foundation of the Physiocratic school, also believed that it was the observance of the laws of nature advocated by Confucianism that brought about the sustainable development and prosperity of Chinese society. He thought this stress on the natural law resulted from Confucian ethics marked by the tendency of atheism. In his view, it was quite necessary for Westerners to use Confucianism as a tool to guide their inner spirits, as well as to restrain the abuse of power by religious systems. The German Enlightenment thinker Christian Wolf (1679-1754) also held the idea that the ancient Chinese believed in natural reason, as they neither knew the existence of a Creator, nor had a nature-based religion, let alone writings of the light of revelation (Larrimore, 2000).

### **The Dimension of Rationalism**

What greatly impressed the Enlightenment thinkers was the concept of “rational” social governance in the pre-Qin period of China. It seemed that this concept was able to help them build the “ideal state” in Europe. For example, Voltaire believed that in practice, Confucian philosophy emphasized the role of natural reason (which highlights human relations and social governance), rather than a supernatural divine power, in exploring the existence of the world and the meaning of life (Voltaire, 1990). The French philosopher Denis Diderot (1713-1784) directly commended that Confucianism, for its use of reason, instead of religion, should govern the country. Additionally, from the perspectives of metaphysics and Deism, Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) believed that Confucian concepts such as *li* (rational principle), *taiji* (the supreme ultimate) and *wu-wei* (non-action) were naturally rational. Therefore, he advocated that Europeans, who had deep-rooted religious traditions, should incorporate such natural rational elements into their Christian beliefs so that they could accept knowledge and science in the process of secularization (Willy, 1990). Likewise, Heinrich Diefrich (1723-1789) held the idea that European governments should regard China as a model, as it was the only country in the world that combined political governance, Confucius education and moral behavior. In his eyes, political and economic systems should be the embodiment of morality in the field of social management (Dawid, 2018; Shen, 1985). These points are what European Enlightenment thinkers construed from classical Chinese philosophical thoughts. They were in line with Enlightenment thinkers’ rationalist thoughts, and, with their great practical significance, served as a complement to the Europeans’ original conceptual framework.

### **The Dimension of Liberalism**

Voltaire showed a particular interest in the meaning of freedom in Confucian philosophy. Voltaire noted that in China, a country of natural Confucius spirit and free from religious

autocracy, people enjoyed full freedoms of belief, of choosing a career, and of establishing settlements (Larrimore, 2000). By revealing ancient China in this way, Voltaire was actually exposing the absurdity of European religious intolerance in a relatively safe academic context provided by European missionaries who had just returned from China. He wanted to find a new way to advocate for the advancement of science and liberty in Europe. In this sense, it is not an exaggeration to say that Voltaire's propaganda about the image of China is a direct advocacy of the value of freedom. On the other hand, as Willy (1990) believed, the long history of China, and the good laws and tolerance of religion in pre-Qin society would also shed light on the liberalistic significance of science and reason being supported by Confucian ideals.

Besides, according to Christian (2019), the *Wu-wei Er-zhi* ("govern by doing nothing that goes against nature") thought in Taoism, a classical Chinese philosophy, had become a typical example of the interpretation given by European Enlightenment thinkers under the influence of a liberal mindset. European intellectuals were generally convinced of the existence of an endogenous Chinese model of *wu-wei*. This conviction greatly supported the theoretical assertion made by Francois Quesnay's laissez-faire economics of physiocracy: In order to achieve the state of "peace and harmony" advocated by Confucianism and Taoism, and develop a prosperous agricultural culture, the governor should organize society and engage in production in accordance with the idea of *Wu-wei Er-zhi*. As Quesnay stressed, the key idea of *Wu-wei Er-zhi* was not "doing nothing," but letting the natural laws rule and the abandoning of too many interventions. Under the initiative of Quesnay, the liberal economic ideology of some European countries started to move away from the interventionist mercantilism of Europe and towards the Chinese concept of "natural order." According to Christian's (2019) research, this Chinese agricultural concept of *wu-wei* was successfully combined with the traditional Swiss business model, which made Switzerland the earliest paradigm of *Wu-wei Er-zhi* in Europe. This combination strongly indicates that European liberal economy did not result purely from local thought. At least, in terms of Switzerland, its success benefits from the effective practice of the revisions and application of the essence of classical Chinese thought, *wu-wei*.

### **The Dimension of Secularism**

While seeking for the secularization of society, European Enlightenment thinkers noticed that, in the Far East, there was a country named China with a reliable chronicle of its long history and people who had never heard of the biblical flood. Apparently, knowing the Chinese chronology cast doubt on the Western chronology based on the *Bible* (Dawid, 2018). As a consequence, this knowledge undermined the authority of Christian doctrine and had a great impact on Christian ideology, which was regarded by Westerners as the only original, legitimate and divine system of thought. The chronicle of China has also shown that, without the Christian faith, ancient Chinese people could also make extraordinary accomplishments in the fields of medicine, botany, pharmacology, architecture, music, painting, sculpture, and

Chinese inventions (Chinese compass, print, gunpowder, etc.). Even in the field of mathematics and astronomy, ancient Chinese people had great attainments. All these facts relativized Christian heritage (Vossius, 1685).

In the eyes of Enlightenment thinkers and Jesuits, Confucian ethics' focus on education blazed a trail for harmonizing family, society, the imperial examination system, and political life in a natural way dependent on rational moral education. In this oriental picture, people work and live according to ethics and the natural laws instead of instructions revealed by God directly to religious authorities. In conclusion, it was such historical practices, without God's interventions, that represented an ultimate accomplishment of human reason in the field of morality (Labruno, 1688). Dawid (2018) offered a long list of famous Enlightenment thinkers who held such views: Temple (1963, p. 114) believed that "the highest happiness of all humanity lies in the perfection of natural reason;" Nicolas Fréret thought Confucianism held the clues for making all humanity happy, and hence it should be universalized; Sweetman (1999) even argued that the natural order revealed by Confucianism should be the supreme principle of all human legislation, and of all political, economic, and social behaviors. As for Voltaire (1999), he believed that in China's long historical tradition, the natural religious spirit of Confucianism is linked to the moral perfection of mankind. Long before the Westerners had written languages, the Chinese had been able to record their history consistently by a fixed language. As pointed out by Ankersmit (1983), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz had provided another explanation for naturalist ethics. Leibniz believed that the so-called *tian-ming* (destiny), *tian-dao* (natural order), and *tian-yi* (act of heaven) are the natural laws obeyed by humans in the universe, and that the Chinese understand the world without the inspiration of God. This is a point that Leibniz gave the Jesuits to consider in seeking an alternative to secularization. In conclusion, the Enlightenment movement's attitude towards religion cannot be simply equated with moving towards secularization. On the contrary, in the dimension of secularism, Chinese culture and the Confucian ethic spirit were an inspiration for the Westerners, helping them find the accurate expression of thoughts during the process of religious reform after the Western Enlightenment thinkers introduced Chinese culture and Confucian ethics to the Western world.

## **Cross-cultural Anthropological Perspective for Interpreting Outsiders**

### **Criticism of Common Sense**

During the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, when the Great Geographical Discoveries continuously brought expanded knowledge of China, India and the Islamic countries, the European concept of "humanity" was greatly enriched and improved. Moreover, the laws, social systems, philosophies, economic phenomena, cultures and customs from outside countries, presented in what we call ethnographic materials today, have greatly aroused doubts about

the Eurocentric “common sense” constructed by religious authority and many hidden powers. It is the introduction to classical Chinese ideas that inspired Enlightenment scholars to adopt the perspective of cross-cultural communications, and provided important anthropologically critical perspectives for them to discover the philosophies of the outside world.

The significance of understanding these foreign beliefs, life experiences and developed knowledge on the ethnographical level could be to thoroughly examine “common sense” and the reflecting Western models that underly cultural prejudice, solidify values and create stereotypes through new lessons learned from “the other,” from different life-histories and diverse cultures. Western Enlightenment scholars discovered a challenge to Western religious systems from the Confucian ideals in classical Chinese thoughts through the large numbers of Eastern texts, artworks and symbols. More specifically, from the Enlightenment of Chinese chronicles, Confucian natural ethics and social relations, and the natural rationality and laws of *Wu-wei Er-zhi*, Europeans saw the limitations of their self-centeredness, the great faults in Christian sacred history, and the necessity of religious secularization (Israel, 2006). The conversation between ancient Eastern philosophy and early Western Enlightenment, which was based on self-reflection and self-criticism related to the Western religious system and common sense, provided to be an important source of ideas for the modernization of Europe, for self-reconsideration and criticism of the common sense derived from the Western religious system.

### **Criticism of Eurocentrism**

Enlightenment scholars, from an anthropological perspective, held that Christian missionaries and they themselves, although highly accomplished, were also potentially motivated to adopt the point of view of Eurocentrism as a traditionally engaged device based on their own history and ideology when examining and interpreting other civilizations, no matter how impartially they tried to read and understand classical Chinese ideas. For this reason, Voltaire critically pointed out in his important work *An Essay on Universal History, the Manners, and Spirit of Nations*, that the tendency of centrism in Western epistemology would greatly influence Westerners’ understanding of foreign knowledge, experience and values (Vukovich, 2012). Additionally, the Western academe’s desire to understand Eastern thought was based on “a Baconian paradigm of Western knowledge-centered power,” not because the Eastern traditions themselves were worth knowing, and this desire was based on Westerner’s own standards and for their own sake (Said, 2003). First, this caused Westerners’ understanding of Chinese stories to be highly subjective. For example, Enlightenment philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), who adhered to a Eurocentric view through which to judge historicity, regarded Chinese chronology and natural ethics as unreal myths which could only exist in texts (Vico, 1948, p. 61). Voltaire believed that in the framework of Eurocentrism, the real history of China as the oldest nation in the world would be ignored (Willy, 1990). However, the actual existence of classical Chinese thought was a notice from oriental wisdom about the necessity of a better

system and customs to broaden Westerners' knowledge. Although Westerners may never be able to completely understand a foreign culture from a bird's eye view, it still allowed them to go beyond their limited horizons. Cross-cultural comparisons, from many perspectives, helped Westerners adopt pluralism and enabled them to understand the existence of humans from different cultures as being within the scope of humanity (Vukovich, 2012).

### Cross-cultural Criticism of Translation

Philosophy, as an academic discipline, has been to a great extent defined by concepts of Anglo-European languages and discussions. In this sense, for Westerners in the Enlightenment period, scholars had very few resources from textual studies, discourse studies, narratology, religious ethics or archaeology to help them capture and understand the complex concepts in classical Chinese texts, such as *li* (principle), *qi* (material), *taiji* (the Great ultimate), *dao* (the Way), *li* (rites), *zhong-yong* (moderation), *tian* (universe, god), and *tian-ren-he-yi* (man is an integral part of nature). Moreover, Eurocentrism, as a powerful discourse is always socio-culturally embedded. Particularly, the asymmetry of Eastern culture and Western Christian culture has placed an observable subjectivity in European's interpretations of Chinese texts. Many Enlightenment scholars were keenly aware of this. For example, Leibniz, Voltaire, and Quenay all believed it was a naive approach to adopt a dualistic view of "center-edge" in the interpreting process of Chinese texts. This would lead to subjectivity in understanding the uniqueness and intrinsic value of "the other" culture, whether inadvertently or intentionally, facing the risk of improper assumptions and understandings. In their view, the interpretations of classical Chinese texts should be premised on the critical understandings of their own culture in the cross-cultural communications (Willy, 1990). Therefore, they must go beyond word-for-word translation within their framework of understanding, and look for more resources for dialogue to facilitate communications.

Leibniz's defense of Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) pointed out several reasons why Matteo Ricci was very close to the spirit of classical Chinese texts. First, he had spent most of his life in China, which enabled him to speak southern Chinese dialects fluently. Secondly, he had extensive contacts with Chinese people from various social classes. What is more, he could interpret the *Analects (Lunyu)*, the *Tao Te Ching (Daode Jing)* and the *Zhuangzi* in multiple languages. Similarly, Leibniz himself refused to understand China simply by reading translated documents. In fact, he chose to investigate China through the large number of reports and letters sent back by Christian missionaries, the works published by the Jesuits involved in Chinese society, his discussions with translators regarding the cultural backgrounds of Chinese rhetoric, and the visual symbols of Chinese artworks and other Chinese specialties, such as Chinese tea, silk, porcelain, and traditional Chinese medicine (Leibniz & Wolff, 1992). Leibniz, as an Enlightened thinker, was good at critical cross-cultural thinking. Although the historical resources available to him were not really sufficient, he used the limited resources available to

him to let his understanding resonate with Eastern thoughts (Dawid, 2018), and then tell the Chinese story in a philosophically dialogic way.

### Conclusion

The sufficient contents in classical Chinese texts with their many and varied ideas were actually beyond Enlightenment thinkers' understanding. In addition, Western philosophers strove valiantly to grasp the fundamentals of classical Chinese philosophy but ended up, in the main, merely mirroring their own prior obsessions. Despite this, drawing on great experience in the exploration of the spiritual world the classical Chinese philosophic ideas, as an important intellectual resource and a great mining of wisdom, were extensively adopted and did facilitate the Enlightenment movement, especially when it was installed in the narrative framework of the European Enlightenment. Taken a step further, these classic philosophies have been shaped into the various European versions of tools which were modified and adopted by Enlightenment thinkers such as Matteo Ricci, Leibniz, Voltaire, Quenay, Diderot, and Wolf for their cross-cultural self-reflection and self-criticism. The most enlightening point is that, to promote and uphold the essence of the classical Chinese spirit, making it as shiny as how European culture now appears to the rest of the world, it is necessary to acquire a Chinese narrative which can be widely expressed in the cross-cultural communication dimension, within the "outsider" narrative framework. Only in this way can the classical Chinese spirit become an intellectual resource that can be shared by all mankind and contribute to the understanding of human survival values, meanings and prospects.

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