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## Chinese Cosmogonies, Rational Philosophers of Ancient China and their Influence on Leibniz

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# Chinese Cosmogonies, Rational Philosophers of Ancient China and their Influence on Leibniz

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## PLAN

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1. Introduction
2. Cosmogonic Myths in China
  2. 1. Pangu: the Creator of the World
  2. 2. Fuxi: the Chinese Mythic Emperor
  2. 3. The Chaos, the *Yang* and the *Yin*
3. From Pre-Imperial Myths to Cosmogonic Theories
  3. 1. The *Tao*, the *Te* and the *Li*
  3. 2. The Cosmogonic Divide Revisited: Rational and Moral Philosophers
4. Philosophical Considerations of Leibniz
5. Conclusion

## TEXTE

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### 1. Introduction

When Heaven and Earth were yet unformed, all was ascending and flying, diving and delving. Thus, it was called the Grand Inception. The Grand Inception produced the Nebulous Void. The Nebulous Void produced space-time; space-time produced the original *qi*. A boundary [divided] the original *qi*. That which was pure and bright spread out to form Heaven; that which was heavy and turbid congealed to form Earth.<sup>1</sup>

- 1 The first Chinese cosmogonic myths originated in early times, as symbolic narratives that meant to explain how everything started and how the universe, the earth and mankind appeared. It is believed in China that the oldest legend was first recorded during the Three Kingdoms period,<sup>2</sup> and tells the story of Pangu,<sup>3</sup> which we will describe in point 2.1. of this article. Although the story of Pangu goes that this creature would eventually give birth to the first human be-

ings, Fuxi and Nüwa, the latter is found to have been recorded six centuries before the Pangu's legend. In fact, the tale of Nüwa, as analyzed in Point 2.2., is first registered in the book "Heavenly Questions" (or "The Songs of Chu") from around the fourth century B.C. Correspondingly, the first record of cosmogonic theories appears in China around the fourth and third centuries B.C., with the *Tao Te Ching* suggesting the origin of the world in a less mythical way, as we shall see in point 3.1.

- 2 As for the basis of the Chinese cosmological system, often referred to as "correlative cosmology", it is generally understood to be structured around the eight trigrams (Qian, Dui, Li, Zhen, Xun, Kan, Gen, and Kun); and the sixty-four hexagrams of the *Book of Changes*, commonly known as *I Ching*. This book also sets out its own cosmogony when it says that the beginning is set by Qian, which "by positing the beginning, can further the world with beauty. Its true greatness lies in the fact that nothing is said about the means by which it furthers".<sup>4</sup>
- 3 On the other hand, to understand this categorization of the Chinese cosmology as "correlative", we must remember that as the end of the Warring States Period (420-221 B.C.) came near, the Han Dynasty became dominated by new beliefs in the fields of cosmology and of metaphysics. These changes would influence the Chinese thought thereafter. These theories would come to be known as "correlative cosmology" and they would bring together several cosmological principles<sup>5</sup> and elements, like Yin and Yang, the five agents (*wu xing*), which are wood, fire, earth, metal, and water, and finally the eight trigrams and 64 hexagrams. These elements appear together in some primordial works, namely the *Lüshi Chunqiu*<sup>6</sup> but also in one of the records of Pangu, as we shall see. These components of Chinese thought are also categories that aggregate entities or phenomena, namely by the fact that the five elements have correlations with directions, seasons, colors, emblematic animals, numbers, internal organs and so on.
- 4 The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines "Cosmogony" as (1) a theory of the origin of the universe, or (2) the creation or origin of the world or universe.<sup>7</sup> In China, cosmogonic theories are more concepts of an origin than of a creation, as only a couple of myths speak of creation, but theories do not. Furthermore, Chinese mythological cosmogonies

and cosmogonic theories, although in some cases surfacing in different periods of time, survived and evolved in midst of an intellectual proximity, as we will see in the next chapters of this article. The result of this dialectic would then much later have effects in Europe as we shall see in Leibniz's writings.

- 5 This all started long before the period of great development in Astronomy that China experienced, with the first detailed records of astronomical observations in the fourth century B.C.,<sup>8</sup> being generally accepted that the first Chinese conceptualizations of the planetary system were erected around this time too.<sup>9</sup> The difference between these Chinese astronomical conceptions of a planetary system and the Chinese cosmogonic theories of the origins of the universe and the world is that the latter had a strong connotation with philosophical thought, be it Taoist or Confucian. The similarity is that although these conceptualizations integrated important notions of space and time, they were also proof of epochal ingenuousness and dragged along mythological elements not just characteristic of the time but mainly of Chinese culture in general.
- 6 In fact, cosmogonic theories in China were brought up by Taoism, which was first recognized as the foundation of a philosophical doctrine and a major shift in philosophical orientation, during the fourth and third centuries B.C.,<sup>10</sup> and later as a religious system, around the second century A.D., although the question of when it becomes a religion *per se* is a major debate in the history of religion. From here we see that, in China, cosmogony and philosophy went hand in hand, together with cosmology, in the sense that they convey an explanation of things and nature as a coherent system.<sup>11</sup> Although one cannot find a concept of "myth" in China, it is possible to find elements from the Chinese legends of the origin of the universe in Chinese philosophy and vice-versa.
- 7 This connection between science and divination resulted also from the need of control that was felt by the authorities. In those early days, the Chinese population lived sedentarily and depended on agriculture. There was a general fear of natural disasters and of nomad invasions, and that fear was overcome with the intervention of the emperor, by showing control over the cosmic order, which was conceived in a global dimension that subsumed both natural and social

levels of life. The power of the emperor was such that: “According to the Chinese political theory, the emperor ruled the Middle Kingdom at the pleasure of Heaven, so events in the heavens signified approval or disfavor of an imperial regime”.<sup>12</sup> A similar tendency can be glimpsed when researching Chinese cosmogony, both in the dimension of the legends (a powerful force or creature) and of the theories (the power of *Tao*) that conceptualize the origin of the universe.

- 8 In the present article, we intend to see how this process evolved in China, since time immemorial, and then how it was spread to Europe through the work of the Jesuit missionaries, influencing the thought of a German philosopher, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), and articulating it with the conceptualization of key cosmological issues of Taoism and Confucianism and how they were reflected in the developing intellectual corpus of seventeenth-century Europe.
- 9 To begin with, it is important to remember that in China the need for order also influenced the dimension of cosmogony, besides cosmology and life sciences. This social order would be established around the time of the Warring States Period with the philosophical thought of Taoism and Confucianism. One third line of thought in China is that of Buddhism, arriving in the country later, during the second century A.D., but it was born in India, and it focuses itself on the idea of *Dharma*, for which we will not include it in our review.
- 10 Before the institution of aforesaid sets of beliefs took place, Chinese cosmogonic thought was shrouded in myths that deserve a brief attention, in our opinion, for the sake of comparison with Western cosmogony, particularly in what concerns the specific feature of the absence of a “creator-God”.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Cosmogonic Myths in China

14. [...] Who foresaw it all in the beginning, when the first signs appeared? 15. By what law was Nüwa raised up to become high lord? By what means did she fashion the different creatures?<sup>14</sup>

- 11 Of the greatest interrogations made by men, the one that questions the origin of mankind and of the world has been recurrent and it has led to the formation of several myths, which are classified as cos-

mogonic mythology, and which have been object of variations throughout the various civilizations and cultures, although they can be enumerated according to a few common features. Among other things, they can display the image of: (1) a creator, preceded by matter that can be materialized in the ocean, chaos, or earth; (2) *ex nihilo*, which implies that nothing preexisted the creation; or (3) by the action of a mythological being, either spirit or animal.

- 12 It is many times suggested that China does not have a creation myth, since its cosmogonic myths mainly depart from a primeval vapor, which contained in itself energy to control matter, time, and space, and which transforms into a duality of elements, *Yin* and *Yang*.<sup>15</sup> This means that the second category mentioned *supra* does not apply in the Chinese cosmogonies, which is somehow shown by the fact that the Chinese language does not have a translation for *ex nihilo*.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, there is at least one example of the first category (Fuxi, which we will analyze below); whilst the latter takes form in the Chinese cosmogony through the mythological monster Pangu, examined next. We will look at these examples briefly, and then concentrate on the myth of cosmic forces *Yin* and *Yang*, as this would prevail as a central idea of the main Chinese traditional thought, Confucianism and Taoism, until today.

## 2. 1. Pangu: the Creator of the World

In the beginning there was darkness everywhere, and Chaos ruled. Within the darkness there formed an egg, and inside the egg the giant Pangu came into being. For aeons, safely inside the egg, Pangu slept and grew. When he had grown to a gigantic size, he stretched his huge limbs and in so doing broke the egg. The lighter parts of the egg floated upwards to form the heavens and the denser parts sank downwards, to become the earth. And so was formed earth and heaven, *Yin* and *Yang*.<sup>17</sup>

- 13 Pangu is one of the most popular creation myths in China, and one of few at that, but it only first appears in the third century A.D.<sup>18</sup> The Chinese cosmogonic mythology attributes to this mythical creature the origin of the world and everything that lies within, as well as the creation of the cosmos and all that it contains. According to the ancient tale, there was a time when the universe was made of dark

chaos in the form of a cosmic egg, designated “Primordial Chaos” (*Hun Dun*). This egg was the home of a giant who was sleeping and who broke its shelter when he woke up. A part of the egg became the sky (bright *Yang*) and another formed earth (dark *Yin*), setting the beginning of *Yin* and *Yang*. Pangu grew up for eighteen thousand years, pushing earth and sky apart and dying when his work was done. After his death, his limbs became the mountains on earth, his breath became the wind, his voice thunder, his eyes the sun and the moon, and his hair the stars.

**Fig. 1. Pangu holding the Yin-Yang symbol**



19<sup>th</sup>-century European print after a Chinese drawing; in the British Museum

([www.britannica.com/topic/Pan-Gu](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Pan-Gu), consulted on 19.01.2020)

- 14 The oldest known record of the legend goes back to the third century – the *Sanwu liji* (*Historical Records of the Three Sovereign Divinities and the Five Gods*), attributed to the Taoist author Xu Zheng (A.D. 220-265), who lived during the “Three Kingdoms period”,<sup>19</sup> that says:

Heaven and earth were in chaos like a chicken's egg, and Pangu was born in the middle of it. In eighteen thousand years Heaven and the earth opened and unfolded. The limpid that was *Yang* became the heavens, the turbid that was *Yin* became the earth. Pangu lived

within them, and in one day he went through nine transformations, becoming more divine than Heaven and wiser than earth. Each day the heavens rose ten feet higher, each day the earth grew ten feet thicker, and each day Pangu grew ten feet taller. And so it was that in eighteen thousand years the heavens reached their fullest height, earth reached its lowest depth, and Pangu became fully grown. Afterwards, there was the Three Sovereign Divinities. Numbers began with one, were established with three, perfected by five, multiplied with seven, and fixed with nine. That is why Heaven is ninety thousand leagues from earth.<sup>20</sup>

- 15 Later, Ge Hong (A.D. 283-343)<sup>21</sup>, in the book *Master of Preserving Simplicity, Inner Writings*, would also describe Pangu. Despite the lack of earlier sources, it has been speculated that the birth of the myth of Pangu may go as back as the Upper Paleolithic.<sup>22</sup> It is also considered by some that Pangu may be originally an Indian tale, and it is mentioned in important Buddhist scriptures.<sup>23</sup>
- 16 According to the legend, this mythological being would have produced two universal forces or principles – chaos and order, Yin and Yang – which, when combined, formed the four emblems (*sì xiang*): These four mythological creatures that helped Pangu separate the sky from earth, appeared among the Chinese constellations along the ecliptic, and were viewed as the guardians of the four cardinal directions. They were the Dragon in the East, the Bird in the South, the Tiger in the West, and the Tortoise in the North. Each of them is identified with a cardinal direction and a color, representing also a season of the year, a virtue, and four of the Chinese “five elements” or “five agents” (*wuxing*), that is wood, fire, metal, and water (the fifth being earth that resides in the center of this configuration). These emblems and elements dominate Chinese life until today. The reference to the five elements in the myth of Pangu has been found again recently, in a version of the myth recorded during the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618-907), in what seems to be a neglected source:<sup>24</sup>

[8] When Pangu died, his head became the *jia*, his throat became the *yi*, his shoulders became the *bing*, his heart became the *ding*, his bladder became the *wu*, his spleen became the *ji*, his ribs became the *geng*, his lungs became the *xin*, his kidney became the *ren*, his feet became the *gui*.<sup>25</sup>



- 17 In this quote, the five elements are present through the reference to the stems *jia* and *yi* (wood), *bing* and *ding* (fire), *wu* and *ji* (earth), and *geng* and *xin* (metal) born from the body of Pangu after his death. In Chinese metaphysics, these are the ten heavenly stems, or celestial stems (*tiangan*), used in combination with the Earthly Branches (i.e., the 12 animals in the Chinese astrology, which correspond to months of the year and cardinal directions), to create a cycle of twelve days, which will in the end produce a total cycle of sixty days, generating a 60-year calendrical cycle. The presence of the elements in this ancient myth is representative of the strength of the elements in Chinese thought, transferred also to the *bagua*, which we will analyze further down on this article.
- 18 The myth of Pangu continues and, at a certain point, leads us to our next tale – Fuxi, a popular hero in China, who is credited for creating humanity and devising the eight trigrams that would be an important basis for Taoist belief system.

## 2. 2. Fuxi: the Chinese Mythic Emperor

In the beginning there was no moral or social order. Men knew their mothers only, not their fathers. When hungry, they searched for food; when satisfied, they threw away the remnants. They devoured their food, skin and hair, drank the blood, and dressed themselves in skins and rushes. Then came Fuxi and looked upward and contemplated the images in the heavens and looked downward and contemplated the events on earth. He united husband and wife, regulated the five stages of change and laid down the laws of humanity. He devised the eight trigrams, to gain mastery over the world.<sup>26</sup>

- 19 One very old Chinese myth of the creation of the universe as a systematic orderly structure takes us back to ancient China, and the time when a mythical emperor, Fuxi, imagined the moment of creation of the universe in the back of a turtle coming out of a river, laying the foundation of Chinese civilization and devising the first trigram, that would later provide for the birth of Taoism. The discovery is believed to also lead to the creation of calligraphy.

**Fig. 2. Seated portrait depicting Fuxi and the turtle**



Painted by L. Ma of the Song Dynasty

([www.commonswikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ma-Lin-Fuxi-and-turtle.jpg](http://www.commonswikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ma-Lin-Fuxi-and-turtle.jpg), consulted on 25.01.2020)

- 20 It is said that when Pangu created the earth, his body also generated a powerful being called Huaxu, who would give birth to a twin brother and sister, Fuxi and Nüwa, with faces of human and bodies of snakes. Fig. 3. An ancient painting of Fuxi (right) and Nüwa (left)



Unearthed in the Astana Cemetery, in Xinjiang

(Anonymous, *Zhongguo gu dai shu hua jian ding zu*. 1997. *Zhongguo hui hua quan ji. Zhongguo mei shu fen lei quan ji*. Beijing: Wen wu chu ban she. Volume 1. Public Domain, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fuxi#/media/File:Anonymous-Fuxi\\_and\\_N%C3%BCwa.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fuxi#/media/File:Anonymous-Fuxi_and_N%C3%BCwa.jpg), consulted on 16.06.2020)

- 21 Some also refer to Fuxi as the original human who lived in the mythological Kunlun Mountain together with his sister Nüwa. In the myth, they had faces of humans and bodies of snakes and they created humanity out of clay figures. These would have been the earliest human beings on earth according to the legend. Meanwhile, other historical documents say that Fuxi was born in Tianshui, province of Gansu. He would become an “emperor” who lived more than six thousand years before the first emperor of China, Qin Shihuang (259-210 B.C.), who reached the imperial throne by overthrowing all the other state kingdoms and united the country in 221 B.C.
- 22 The legend continues saying that Fúxī would have earned the respect of his tribe and all other tribes and set up a basic structure of social

governance, introducing the first regulations on marriage, and composing the first music. His main achievement was devising the *bagua* or eight trigrams, which would become an instrument for divination in ancient China, and which is represented by an octagonal diagram with one trigram on each side. The book *I Ching* would later be taken into strong consideration in Leibniz's studies, and it illustrates a philosophical system about how to keep human behavior in accordance with the alternating cycles of nature.

Fig. 4. Fuxi "Earlier Heaven" *bagua* arrangement



Bagua diagram by Zhao Huiqian ("River Map spontaneously [generated] by Heaven and Earth"), this image may in fact be a reproduction of the diagram by Hu Wei in his *Yitu mingbian* ("Clarification of the diagrams in the book of changes"), dated 1706.

(Public domain, [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bagua\\_Zhao\\_Huiqian.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bagua_Zhao_Huiqian.jpg), consulted on 12.07.2020)

- 23 By doing this, according to the legend, Fuxi became the original creator of some of the main features of Chinese cosmogony and cosmology as outlined by scholastic philosophers, after the Han Dynasty ruled the country, relying their thought mainly on order and hierarchy. It is still nevertheless necessary to distinguish the difference between cosmogonic myths and cosmogonic philosophies, which we will do further ahead.
- 24 The oldest document that mentions this myth seems to be the *Shan-hai jing* (*The Classic of Mountains and Seas*), and its earliest version dates back to the fourth century B.C., although its present form was

found centuries later, during the Han Dynasty. It is a Chinese classical text that describes mythical geography and beasts, and that illustrates more than 550 mountains and rivers. It is possible that it results from the work of several people who consecutively wrote it, between the period of the Warring States and the Han Dynasty.<sup>27</sup>

## 2. 3. The Chaos, the *Yang* and the *Yin*

And so, within a world that had once seemed consumed by chaos and confusion, patterns of a more orderly change began to appear. From a dark *Yin* emerged a light *Yang*, from which, in time a dark *Yin* would once again appear. The promise of the “wood” of spring gave life to an early summer “fire”. The energy of the early summer “fire” brought the “earth” to a high summer’s fecundity, whose harvests were gathered by the “metal” of autumn which yielded in turn to the winter stillness of “water” in whose icy depths everything would rest before the wood stirred again.<sup>28</sup>

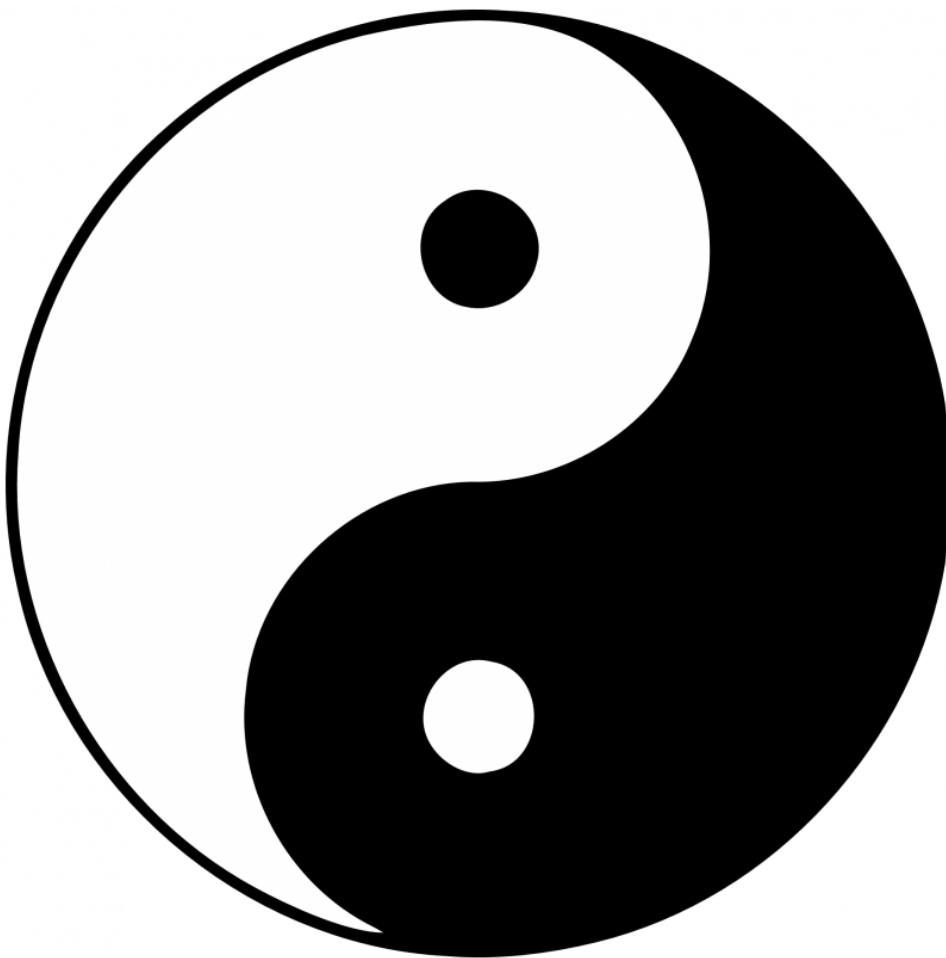
25 Another myth present in Chinese cosmogony is the one of Chaos followed by *Yin* and *Yang*. This story tells us of an era when chaos ruled, and everything in the universe twisted and turned, flew and dove.<sup>29</sup> In the beginning, there was stillness or *wuji*, represented by an empty circle. Through the action of the celestial law there evolved Primordial Matter or *taiji*, represented by a black-filled circle. By revolving, this thickened and was represented by a circle, of the same size, divided by an S shaped line, the left side of which is white with a black dot and the right side is black with a white dot. These halves represent respectively, the Great Positive and Negative Principles of the Dualism, the *Yang* and the *Yin*. These spring from the *Tao* (or *Dao*), which is the mother of all things. The line that divides black and white is the *Tao*, the “way”.

26 One of the sources of this legend was found, in 1973, in a tomb dated from 168 B.C., among the *Huangdi Sijing* manuscripts. It is called *Origins of the Dao* (*Daoyuan*), and it is believed to have been written in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. In this Taoist cosmogonic myth, the universe and humans appeared from misty vapor.<sup>30</sup> According to this text:

At the beginning of eternal past all things penetrated and were identical with great vacuity, Vacuous and identical with the One, rest

at the One eternally. Unsettled and confusing, there was no distinction of dark and light. Though Tao is undifferentiated, it is autonomous: “It has no cause since ancient times”, yet “the ten thousand things are caused by it without any exception” Tao is great and universal on the one hand, but also formless and nameless.<sup>31</sup>

**Fig. 5. Yin and Yang Symbol or *Taijitu***



(Licence creative commons)

- 27 From chaos, Tao was born, as the way driven by the force of Qi, and by constant movement of the light Yang and stillness of the dark Yin. This “way” that could never be clearly explained in human words would set the order in heaven, earth and man, a natural order that separated heaven from earth. From here on, multiplicity has arisen from unity, when two was created from one, three from two, and so on, until ten thousand things were created, all ruled by harmony and peace. This lasted until everything showed the other part of itself,

which was its opposite and had the exact same value, chaos remained the completion of order, difficulty of easy, low of high, winter of summer, rain of blue sky.

- 28 Through observation, people on earth<sup>32</sup> understood the secret code of the cosmos and devised mathematical language and symbols that could be used to communicate with heaven. Mirroring heavenly coordinates, and with cosmic authority, the people on earth could structure a calendar that allowed them to control harvests, climate, and the rivers.
- 29 This legend carries with it the history of the birth of the lunar calendar that would interestingly be one of the main responsibilities of the Jesuits as directors of the Beijing Astronomical Observatory after they arrived in China in the seventeenth century.<sup>33</sup> This shows us again as in China's cosmogony there is not a clear distinction between reality and myth, present and past.

### 3. From Pre-Imperial Myths to Cosmogonic Theories

- 30 The myths we just briefly cited are an illustration that the affirmation that China has no creation myth is an urban myth in contemporary history.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, it is still evident that Chinese cosmogony does not include *ex nihilo* myths, as in all these legends something was already there, be it vapor, stillness or chaos, before some kind of intervener brought order to what existed previously. Seen from the point of view of the philosophers' eyes, it is an example of cosmogony of a "spontaneous self-generating cosmos having no creator, god, ultimate cause, or will external to itself".<sup>35</sup> In fact:

It is rather striking that, from this one myth (Pangu), China – perhaps alone among the major civilizations of antiquity – has no real story of creation. This situation is paralleled by what we find in Chinese philosophy, where, from the very start, there is a keen interest in the relationship of man to man and in the adjustment of man to the physical universe, but relatively little interest in cosmic origins.<sup>36</sup>

- 31 Chinese first speculations about the origin of the universe, in connection with nature's system, surfaced between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> cen-

tury B.C. This was also when the broad notions that provide foundation for natural philosophy in China were formulated,<sup>37</sup> and when philosophical thoughts and religious beliefs of Taoism and Confucianism<sup>38</sup> appeared. Repeatedly, we see how life sciences and cosmology combine since the very beginning of cosmogonic theories and religious representations in China. To understand this, we must recognize first that to the Chinese:

Cosmic pattern is self-contained and self-operating. It unfolds itself because of its own inner necessity and not because it is ordained by any external volitional power. Not surprisingly, therefore, Chinese thinkers who have expressed themselves on the subject are unanimous in rejecting the possibility that the universe may have originated through any single act of conscious creation.<sup>39</sup>

- 32 The fact that China never showed any similarity to the Western cosmogonic traditions of speculations generated by the idea of “in the beginning”, led Western thinkers to look at classical Chinese thinkers as “acosmotic”, meaning “that they do not depend in the majority of their speculations upon either the notion that the totality of things (*wan-wu* or *wan-you*, “the ten thousand things”) has a radical beginning, or that these things constitute a single-ordered world”.<sup>40</sup>
- 33 Other authors, such as Needham,<sup>41</sup> look at the Chinese theories of cosmogony as “organismic”.<sup>42</sup> According to this author, the keywords in Chinese cosmological thought are order and pattern, together with “Organism”, leading to a large pattern. The universe is cyclical, and everything in it has a position that makes it behave in a specific way, incurring in the danger of losing that relational position if celestial objects behave differently than they are supposed to. Their existence, exactly as they are, depends thus on the whole world-mechanism, and not on something that pre-existed before them.<sup>43</sup>
- 34 We will now turn our attention to the Chinese theories of the origin of the universe, clustered in the idea of the *Tao* (the way) and brought up, in slightly different ways, by the Chinese Taoist and Confucian lines of thought.



### 3. 1. The Tao, the Te and the Li

There is a thing that is shapeless and complete; it was born before Heaven and Earth. It is still! It is vast! It stands on its own and it does not change; it goes everywhere but is never endangered. It can be taken as the mother of the world. I do not know its name, so I style it “the Way”.<sup>44</sup>

- 35 In China, cosmological speculation enters the philosophical reflection a little late, nearly two centuries after the texts that were considered to found Chinese thought appeared, namely the *Tao Te Ching* by Laozi, probably written between 350 and 250 B.C., and the *Analects* by Confucius (551-479 B.C.), possibly compiled around the year 140 B.C., although it is generally accepted that their existence precedes that compilation.
- 36 Two large schools of thought were formed in China by the time of the Warring States Period: Taoism and Confucianism. In a period of great social and political unrest, that preceded the unification of China as an empire, these schools offered the opportunity for order in the face of chaos.
- 37 Taoism was revealed during the period of Warring States through a short text of poetry presenting the simple way of following the *Tao*, bearing the name of its author, Laozi, and from which we extracted a short citation above. Confucianism and Taoism both advocate a cosmivision with the notion of order (*Dao* or *Tao*) at its core. We shall pause our course of thoughts briefly now to look first at Taoism and its cosmogonic perspective.
- 38 Taoism as a religion emerged in the year A.D. 142 with the revelation of the *Tao* to Zhang Daoling by Taishang Laojun (one of the several ways of referring to the deity that the philosopher Laozi incarnated, according to Taoist belief). Zhang Daoling became the first Celestial Master and founder of the first organized Taoist school of thought. In itself the *Laozi* can be considered a cosmogony, in what it gives us an account of the generation of the cosmos by saying that: “The Way bore the One, the One bore the Two, the Two bore the Three, the Three bore the Myriad Things. The Myriad Things carry Yin on their

backs and embrace *Yang*; harmony is made through the blending of *Qi*".<sup>45</sup>

- 39 Later, during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220), the text was entitled *Tao-te-Ching* (*The Book of the Way and of Virtue*). In this book, Laozi mentions the "primeval beginning of the universe" as a state that is "invisible", "inaudible", and "subtle", and it is "infinite and boundless, it cannot be given any name. It reverts to nothingness".<sup>46</sup> It could be argued that this cosmogonic theory assumes that nothingness is the natural cosmic state.<sup>47</sup>
- 40 *Tao* would be a fundamental notion in Chinese cosmogony in the centuries to come, meaning the way, the method, the *modus operandi*, but also the spontaneous cosmic order, along with the duality *Yin-Yang*, both conceived as the two sides of the mountain of *Tao*, but also as heaven and earth, positive negative, light and shadow, masculine and feminine.
- 41 Besides *Tao*, another important notion in Taoism is *Te*, which refers to the ethical conduct, righteousness of the heart, but also virtue and equity. *Te* is an expression of *Tao* from an active perspective, and it is sometimes translated as "Virtue" or "Power", and it happens when an individual lives and cultivates the *Tao*.
- 42 And finally, there's *Yin* and *Yang*. In Taoism the polar antagonism (-/+ ) is stretched to the level of a cosmological principle, in which the opposites are present in each of them and do not antagonize each other. In China, *Yin* and *Yang* overarch traditional sciences, and in medicine a disease always results from an imbalance between the two.
- 43 In Confucianism, the natural state of the universe is not the nothingness but the idea that "people can enlarge the way; it is not the way that can enlarge people"<sup>48</sup> and this can be achieved through moral development of the human being,<sup>49</sup> among other principles, and it institutes the "Way of Heaven" (*tiandao*), which is a principle of daily renewal. For Confucian thought, *Te* means ethic virtue and it manifests and materializes the *Tao*, which defines the ethic order inside a society governed according to the family relations' patterns and to the actions of the ancestors. In this sense, ethic becomes the foundation of politics.

- 44 A third concept in the Confucianism is the *Li* (cosmic principle) and it is connected to tradition, rituals, and ceremonies. *Li* is associated with the will of Heaven and the structure of the whole universe. Any disturbance to society is thereof considered a disruption of the Order of Nature. It was in this sense that it was believed that too much rain or continuous drought were a result of the emperor misbehaviour or injustice. For the Chinese, the events in the sky and on earth were like phenomenon occurring in parallel dimensions of time, meaning that disruptions in the heart of one, would disrupt the other.
- 45 This means that in the classic Chinese cosmovision, there is not an active subject operating in a passive world, nor is there a passive subject receiving the action of an external operating nature. The subject and nature are one, and one only. On the other hand, *Tao* was not created nor the creator, as nothing was created in the cosmos. In China, there is not a scholastic cosmogony, and cosmology waives the idea of God, as well as the concept of a Law or of abstract laws.<sup>50</sup> Cosmic order and social order are nonetheless images of one another, the difference being that for Taoism society was spontaneous, whereas for Confucianism the state was founded upon family relations and through experiences from previous ancestors.
- 46 Although one can say that Confucianism has at times been the dominant mode of Chinese thinking, at a certain point it found itself challenged by ideas from Legism and Buddhism, besides Taoism, and its traditional views had to be modified. Some followers argued with the new concepts of man, knowledge, and universe. Neo-confucianism would come up as a result from this argument, which some prefer to call “rational philosophy”. One can say thus that Neo-confucianism is a social and ethic philosophy using metaphysical ideas, some borrowed from Taoism, as a framework. As a humanistic and rationalistic theory, it stands for a universe understood through human reason, with a possibility of a harmonious relationship between the universe and the individual through human action.
- 47 Neo-Confucian theories see the natural cosmic state as one of existence, in which heaven produces the myriad of things (“the ten thousand things”) through *Yang* (humanity) and completes them through *Yin* (righteousness).<sup>51</sup> One of the neo-Confucians of the Song School, known as *Lixue* or “School of the Norm”, Zhu Xi (1131-1200), adds that

the natural cosmic state besides being a state of full existence (Being), it is “the Great Ultimate”, viewing it as a non-physical and transcendent cosmic principle (*Li*).<sup>52</sup> This notion of *Li*, in its Neo-Confucian perspective, as an eternal universal principle of heaven, earth and the myriad of things, and the discussion around it roused by the Jesuits, would be analyzed by Leibniz a few centuries later.

### 3. 2. The Cosmogonic Divide Revisited: Rational and Moral Philosophers

- 48 As we have seen, in China, from incredibly early times, the religious, cosmic, and social dimensions were connected and ordered without the need for creation. In fact, “the couple of contraries *Yang* and *Yin* was developed into a cosmology which, on the one hand, systematized and validated innumerable earthly techniques and spiritual disciplines, and on the other hand inspired rigorous and systematic philosophical speculations”.<sup>53</sup> Its distance towards Western thought grew from the fact that Taoism underlined that the *Tao* could not be perceived through speculative rational thought or be verbalized in the language of this same thought, compromising the mathematical-logical expression of cosmic order.
- 49 Diversely, Confucianism’s focus on *Li*, that is on the traditional natural law, by opposition to the formal and explicit law (*Fa*), would keep the classic Chinese civilization away from the legal metaphor for the expression of the laws of Nature. In so doing, Chinese thought expressed reluctance in verbalizing laws and worried about ethics, as a human equivalent of the cosmic order, which operates with harmony and without useless effort.
- 50 Across the centuries, Taoism and Confucianism influenced China, as did Buddhist religion, interacting, and overlapping doctrine and myth, without any of them exhibiting a clear predominance over the other, although one can say that Taoism was always peripheral, and the state got involved in ranking these lines of thought, adopting official religions, or banning others.
- 51 In Europe, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there was one philosopher that showed interest in some aspects of the religious and philosophical Chinese thought. Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646-1716) saw his interest in

China grow during his early youth, particularly after reading G. Spiezel's *De Re Litteraria Sinensium Commentarius*<sup>54</sup> and the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher's *China Monumentis Illustrata*.<sup>55</sup>

**Fig.6. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, by Bernhard Francke**



Oil on canvas, before 1729

Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum Braunschweig, public domain, commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=57268659, consulted in 15.06.20).

- 52 Early in his life, Leibniz realized through the missionary books and letters that the Jesuits succeeded in slowly entering China, learning Chinese language and culture, and introducing there the Western science knowledge and methods and religion. Leibniz would come to support this method in his writings, to achieve what he believed was world harmony and establishing European civilization. He would study the possibility of using the Chinese characters as a universal language of philosophy, failing in that attempt.<sup>56</sup>

- 53 He grew ever more interested in China when six French Jesuit scholars were sent to China, following a request, in 1677, of Father Ferdinand Verbiest<sup>57</sup> for students of science and mathematics. After their establishment in China, Leibniz increased his correspondence with the missionaries, gradually defining with more clarity the focus of his studies of that country.<sup>58</sup> This correspondence would be integrated in his book *Novissima Sinica (Latest News from China)*,<sup>59</sup> including a portrait of emperor Kangxi, an essay by one of the six Jesuits sent to China in 1687 – Father Joachim Bouvet – and excerpts of letters of the Jesuit fathers Lusitan, Verbiest, Grimaldi, Tom and Gerbillon. Leibniz believed in European superiority in theoretical-philosophical sciences, and of China in moral philosophy. He even saw the missionary enterprise as a possible bridge between the two cultures, which is why he advocated that Chinese missionaries should be sent to Europe to teach natural theology.
- 54 Between 1692, when emperor Kangxi signed the Edict of Toleration, after the request of the Portuguese Jesuit Thomas Pereira (1645-1708) for acceptance towards Christianity, and 1707, there was a period of unrestricted work of the Jesuits in China, when among many other activities, the Jesuits studied the Chinese classics, particularly one of the oldest – the *I Ching (Book of Changes)*. Leibniz learned about it through his correspondence with Father Bouvet and his attention to what they thought was a developed code of laws grew and their reflections on it were intensely exchanged thereafter.

## 4. Philosophical Considerations of Leibniz

Bouvet and Leibniz wrote directly to each other exchanging reflections on the Chinese Classic. The famous trigrams of the *I Ching* which follow were of primary interest to both men: ☰, ☷, ☱, ☲, ☳, ☴, ☵, ☶, and ☸. These symbols were allegedly the invention, for purposes of divination, of Fuxi, traditional first emperor of China.<sup>60</sup>

- 55 This German philosopher and mathematician showed a fascination for subjects as diverse as Christianity and Chinese games.<sup>61</sup> His love for knowledge led him to defend the foundation of scientific academies all over the world, including in China, in search of a uni-

versal civilization,<sup>62</sup> and he even brought around the Jesuits to ask the emperor Kangxi to establish a scientific society in China.<sup>63</sup>

- 56 This quest for universal knowledge thus kept a special place for China in this global intellectual *corpus*, which can be shown by the fact that Leibniz understood that “no matter how foolish and paradoxical the Chinese ordinarily appear to be in *re medica*,<sup>64</sup> nevertheless, theirs is better than ours”.<sup>65</sup> Being a mathematician himself, Leibniz showed a special interest for the symbols contained in the *I Ching*, which were seen by Father Bouvet as “universal symbols invented by some extraordinary genius of antiquity [...] in order to present the most abstract principles in all the sciences.”<sup>66</sup> In 1671, Leibniz had conceived the first machine able to multiply, although he would never build it in metal. He would write to Bouvet in 1701 saying:

The new numerical calculus that I have invented [...] gives an admirable representation (or model) of creation [...]. My principle aim is to furnish a new confirmation of the Christian Religion with respect to the sublime article of the Creation [...]. There exists nothing more than these two first principles, God and Nothing; God of all things perfect, and the Non-being of the imperfections of things, devoid of essence.<sup>67</sup>

- 57 Upon studying the trigrams of Fuxi, Leibniz found a great similarity between them and the system of binary arithmetic he had invented in 1679,<sup>68</sup> identifying the broken lines as zero and the straight lines as one, although there was no indication of use of Fuxi’s trigrams as numbers until then. This theory would be later published in 1703.<sup>69</sup> Leibniz believed his theory to be a “rediscovery” of Fuxi’s principles, and not an invention. In their exchange of letters, Bouvet would tell Leibniz:

Although some believe that the *I Ching*, the oldest Chinese and perhaps the world’s oldest work, and the primary source from which this nation (an opinion ascribed to by all scholars) has derived its science and tradition, contains only an evil doctrine, full of superstition, and without fundamental or basic principles; I am not of their opinion and I am even convinced that they delude themselves and that they do injustice to the ancient Chinese who appear to have had long ago a philosophy as sound and as sane, and I dare to add, perhaps sounder and more logical than ours today.<sup>70</sup>

- 58 It does not come as a surprise then that according to some authors, namely E. R. Hughes, there are some close resemblances between Leibniz's theories and the *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*,<sup>71</sup> suggesting that he was influenced by this book, which had been the result of a Jesuit attempt to translate excerpts from the Chinese classics and to summarize Confucius teachings. The book had nevertheless been subjected to the scrutiny of Jesuits in Paris, who made it more like adjusted to the believe in God and the immortality of the soul.<sup>72</sup>
- 59 The similarities seem to be in the use of the concepts of "simple substance", and "preestablished harmony" or the "hypothesis of concomitance" by Leibnitz in his letters written to Arnauld, a disciple of Descartes.<sup>73</sup> The first concept of "simple substance" seemed to be viewed as if everything was composed of simple substances or reduced to such substances, and everything is founded from simple substances. The second idea of "preestablished harmony" says that God has created the world so perfectly that each substance acts according to its law of course of action in perfect harmony with all the other substances. And finally, the third notion of "hypothesis of concomitance" says that everything that happens within the one (the spirit or the body) corresponds exactly to all that happens within the other.
- 60 The correspondence between Leibniz and Bouvet, on the other hand, would include the subject of the question of the Rites. This was a discussion about how adaptable the Chinese, and particularly Confucian, religious practices were to Christianity. Bouvet was amongst the Figurists,<sup>74</sup> who believed that Fuxi was not a Chinese, but the original Lawgiver of Mankind, as indicated by the *I Ching*. The letters exchanged between Leibniz and Bouvet suggest that, not only Leibniz was aware of this theory, but he was also a possible contributor to its formation. Furthermore, he also consented that the worship of ancestors did not conflict with Christian doctrine, when it only involved a political and social, not religious, significance.
- 61 Another aspect of this matter was the one that involved finding Chinese equivalents to Christian concepts. In particular, the Chinese word *Shangdi* would represent God in Chinese thought, according to Ricci,<sup>75</sup> being opposed to this by Nicholas Longobardi, who believed that never did the Neo-Confucian commentaries<sup>76</sup> refer to any true



conception of God. Ricci's position would be rejected by papal ruling in 1742. Curiously, Leibniz would stay on Ricci's side and against Longobardi's position. His belief can be determined from the following passage:

*Li, qi and taiji are only modes of the ultimate substance, which is called Shangdi, that is to say, the King from on high, or else, the Spirit governing Heaven... So, if Shangdi and Li are the same thing, we have every reason to give to God the name of Shangdi. And Father M. Ricci was not wrong in maintaining that the ancient Sages of China recognized and honored a Supreme Being called Shangdi.*<sup>77</sup>

- 62 Although he stood up for the Jesuits' side in this discussion, Leibniz's thoughts on this matter appear to be a less theistic conception in which God tends to become a creator of the world who has arranged things on mechanical principles which relate to the whole, of which they are a part, on an organic basis.
- 63 Simultaneous to the question of the rites and of the translation of the concept of *shangdi*, there would be a debate of the term *Li* and its relation to Christian theology. *Li* would become a central concept to Neo-Confucianism during the Song Dynasty (960-1280), and it would be considered by Leibniz as a term central to his own conception of God. He believed that "the ancient writers of China attributed to *Li*, or the first principle, the very existence of *qi*, or matter".<sup>78</sup> When approaching this subject, Leibniz seems to be the first to translate *Li* as the "first principle", in which he would be followed by many sinologists to come. Leibniz would also accurately detect that whereas *qi* is chaotic, it is organized according to the patterns of infrastructure implied in *Li*. He would also follow the neo-Confucian thought in believing that *Li* acquires an element of priority towards *qi*, although both have a coequal status in some sense. In this perspective, *Li* is like a continuation of a Chinese tradition which employs metaphysical concepts for the purpose of ordering society.
- 64 Leibniz considerations go further and establish a parallel between God and the Neo-Confucian *Li*, in its particular-universal aspect of *Li*, projecting it into his interpretation of Chinese thought stating "He (Zhu Xi) seems to indicate that the particular *Li* is an emanation from the great *Li*".<sup>79</sup> Leibniz supplanted the Christian view which saw the

supreme force of the universe as in part an image of man and presents a supreme force which is first of all mechanical in that the universe operates by processes which have a mathematical regularity. He believed that the essentials of Christianity and Chinese thought and religious practices were commonly held in both cultures in the form of basic principles of natural religion.

## 5. Conclusion

- 65 All myths are an oral creation that can never be considered static or crystallized. It is successively influenced by the society that endlessly repeats it. It can be studied and analyzed together with sciences that focus on the study of man and humanity, like archeology, history, or anthropology. Considering cosmogonic myths, it is advisable to analyze it in close relationship with astronomy. In this article, we tried to look at Chinese myths and their influence in the evolution of Chinese cosmogonies and the reflection on European studies, using an interdisciplinary method that brought together Philosophy and History.
- 66 In China, the line between myth and theory is also difficult to clarify throughout its history. Some authors have sustained that the Han Dynasty needed to rebuild much of the classics from memory, weakening namely the Confucian thought in Chinese society and paving the way for the theory of the five elements and divination to gain popularity.<sup>80</sup>
- 67 From that moment onward, scholars would search for a cosmogony and a cosmovision, looking for the answer for the mysteries of the world, in periods of great social unrest and political instability. In this search, myth and religion (or philosophical-religious thought) would be maintained in proximity, influencing individual and collective behaviour and thought, be it in Confucian adequate conduct or in Taoist cosmic harmony.
- 68 The theory brought on by some authors, like Needham, that Leibniz derived his organicism from Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi, and introduced it to Europe afterwards, contradicts the idea of projection of European cosmogony system on to China. If the first theory is correct, then Leibniz must have taken his conclusions from what he read about China and not from overlapping his own thoughts and a Eurocentric

perspective on to Chinese beliefs. Leibniz's interpretation seems to have been influenced by the timely coincidence where his thought met Neo-Confucianism, mainly that of Zhu Xi, but also, by the experience of the Jesuits in China, who through direct contact may have forged some of the lines of interpretation which Leibniz followed. Consequently, confirmation and not derivation were the key principles of his thoughts about Chinese cosmic thinking.

- 69 We could say that in his conjectures, Leibniz merely replicates the essence of the Cosmogonic divide that kept a gap between Eastern and Western cosmogony, and that the Jesuits kept trying to bridge by imagining parallels to Christian images and representations of the beginning of the world in Chinese culture and thought.
- 70 It is also interesting to see how Chinese theories that derived from fundamental existential characteristics of the people (agriculture, feudalism, lunar calendar, etc.) ended up determining, many centuries later, this fragment of the intellectual life in Europe, and this would be a fascinating outlook to do at some other time in a different study.
- 71 As a final conclusion, we may say that our study indicates that these cosmogeneses are part of a Chinese philosophical heritage, from a speculative and normative perspective, taking the form of a founding narrative with the *Tao* at the heart of the coeval cosmological doctrines. Ultimately, the continuity of earlier cosmogonic traditions provides proof of the profound unity which, over several periods of time, characterizes the first Chinese representations of the origin and formation of the world. It also indicates that, despite this continuity of thoughts and traits, these representational narratives would lead to the development of new and distinct interpretations in the eyes of European philosophers.

## NOTES

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1 *The Huainanzi*, as cited in J.-M. Gescher, *Becoming China: The Story Behind the State* (London: Bloomsbury Caravel, 2017), Chapter 1. The *Huainanzi* is a book from 139 B.C. that compiles essays resulting from literary and philosophical debates between prince Liu An (Prince of Huainan) and several sages invited to the imperial court. It aggregates concepts from Taoism,

Confucianism and Legalism, explaining some of the fundamental principles of Chinese philosophy such as the relation between *Yin* and *Yang* and the five elements. It tackles subjects as diverse as mythology, history, astronomy, geography, philosophy, science, metaphysics, nature, and politics. Cf. C. Le Blanc, M. Rémi (eds.), *Huainan Zi* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, n° 494, Tome II, 2003).

2 The Three Kingdoms (*Sānguó Shídài*) lasted 60 years, between A.D. 220 and 280, and were the result of the division of China among the states of Wei, Shu, and Wu. This period started with the end of the Han Dynasty and was followed by the Jin Dynasty. Cf. J. Needham, *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge University Press, Vol. VII, Part I: The Social Background, 1998), 480.

3 The discussion around the first record of the myth of Pangu is analysed in G. Kósa, “Pangu’s Birth and Death as Recorded in a Tang Dynasty Buddhist Source”, *Archiv Orientalni*, 77 (2009), 169-192.

4 R. Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes (trans.), *The I Ching: Book of Changes* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 4, as cited in J. Liu, “The Status of Cosmic Principle (*Li*) in Neo-Confucian Metaphysics”, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 32/3 (2005), 393; C. J.-D. Javary, P. Faure, *Yi Jing. Le Livre des Changements* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002).

5 E. F. Brindley, *Music, Cosmology, and the Politics of Harmony in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 2-3.

6 About the *Lüshi Chunqiu*; M. de J. Espada, “Jesuit Contributions to the Spread of the Scientific Revolution in China in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century”, *Nacelles* [Online], “Planètes, satellites, comètes, astéroïdes, xvi<sup>e</sup>-xix<sup>e</sup> siècles”.

7 [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cosmogony](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cosmogony) (consulted on 18/06/2020).

8 C. Cullen, *Heavenly Numbers: Astronomy and Authority in Early Imperial China* (Oxford University Press, 2017). Around the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Chinese astronomers observed and recorded celestial phenomena, and the oldest records of astronomical observations date from the Warring States period (420-221 B.C.), such as solar and lunar eclipses (S. T. Won, “A Statistical Survey of Solar Eclipses in Chinese History”, *Popular Astronomy*, 42 (1934), Northfield, Minnesota, Carleton College, 136), *novae* and supernova, comets, and sunspots. P. Y. Ho and P.-Y. Ho, “Ancient and Mediaeval Observations of Comets and Novae in Chinese Sources”, *Vistas in Astronomy*, 5 (1962), 127-225.

- 9 These conceptions were constructed by three main schools: (1) the School of *Gaitian* or *Zhoubi* that conceptualized a structure in which the sun and the moon were attached to a dome that surrounded the earth; (2) the *Huntian* school, which conceived heaven as a celestial sphere, similar to an egg, and the earth like the yolk of the egg; (3) and the *Xuanye* School, which perceived the planetary system as an infinite empty space. M. de J. Espada, *op.cit.*
- 10 F. Perkins, “The Laozi and the Cosmogonic Turn in Classical Chinese Philosophy”, *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, Brill, 11/2, 185-205.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 C. H. Parker, *Global Interactions in the Early Modern Age, 1400-1800* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Essential Histories, 2010), 215.
- 13 A. Chan, *Orientalism in Sinology* (Bethesda: Academica Press, 2009), 7.
- 14 Y. Qu, *Heavenly Questions* (Selections from “The Songs of the South”), as cited in J. Minford, J. S. M. Lau (eds.), *Classical Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Translations* (Chinese University Press, 2000), 44. The *Heavenly Questions* (*Tian Wen*) by Yuan Qu (c. 340-278 B.C.), contained in the Chinese poems collection of “Verses of Chu” (*Chu Ci*), written during the Warring States Period (although it is possible that half of the poems have been composed several centuries later, during the Han Dynasty), is a list of 172 questions about myths and legends. Y. Qu, Y. Song (R. Mathieu: translation, introduction and notes), *Élégies de Chu; Chu ci*, 111 (2004), Série chinoise, Gallimard, Collection Connaissance de l’Orient.
- 15 A. Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction* (JHU Press, 1999), 23.
- 16 P. R. Goldin, “The Myth that China has no Creation Myth”, *Monumenta Serica*, Sankt Augustin: Monumenta Serica Institute, 56 (2008), 1-22; A. Chan, *Orientalism in Sinology* (Bethesda: Academica Press, 2009), 5-21.
- 17 “Pangu and the creation of the world”, in *Chinese Myths* (consulted on 06.01.2020).
- 18 K. Gábor, *op.cit.*, 169-192.
- 19 L. Chen, *Chinese Myths and Legends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 6.
- 20 As cited in *ibidem*, 32-33. Also in R. Mathieu (trad.), *Anthologie des mythes et légendes de la Chine ancienne* (Paris: Gallimard, Connaissance de l’Orient, 1989).

- 21 Ge Hong was a scholar and an alchemist that lived in the Jin Dynasty (265–420) in Jurong, modern Jiangsu. His master work was *Baopu Zi*, i.e. “Master who embraces simplicity”. Cf. D. R. Knechtges, T. Chang (eds), “Ancient and Early Medieval Chinese Literature (Vol. I): a Reference Guide, Part One”, *Handbook of Oriental Studies. Section 4 China* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 269–271; M. de J. Espada, *op.cit.*; also in H. Ge, P. Che (translation, introduction and annotations), *La Voie des Divins Immortels : Les chapitres discursifs du “Baopuzi neipia”* (Paris: Gallimard, Connaissance de l’Orient, Série chinoise, 1999).
- 22 K. C. Chang, “China on the Eve of the Historical Period”, in M. Loewe, E. L. Shaughnessy, (eds), *The Cambridge History of Ancient China* (Cambridge, 1999), 66–68, as referred by P. R. Goldin, “The Myth that China has no Creation Myth”, 2.
- 23 K. Gábor, *op.cit.*, 170.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 169.
- 25 G. Cheng, *Dafang guangfo huayanjing suishu yanyi chao* (Subcommentary on The Flower Garland Sūtra), 1736, p0320c, as cited in K. Gábor, *op.cit.*, 171.
- 26 G. Ban, *Baihu Tongyi*. This book was compiled by the 1<sup>st</sup> century Chinese poet and historian, Ban Gu (A.D. 32–92), under the order of Emperor Zhang (A.D. 57–88) during the Han Dynasty, and it replicates discussions that were held at the time on the theme of the true meaning of the classics. Cf. M. Loewe, *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide*, Society for the Study of Early China, 1993, 347–356; A. E. Clark, *Ban Gu’s History of Early China* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008).
- 27 A. Birrell (ed), *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, translated by A. Birrell (illustrated ed., Penguin, 1999), retrieved 24 April 2014; also in R. Mathieu, *Étude sur la mythologie et l’ethnologie de la Chine ancienne : Traduction annotée du Shanhai jing* (Paris: Collège de France, Institut des hautes études chinoises: diffusion De Boccard, 1983).
- 28 J.-M. Gescher, *Becoming China: The Story Behind the State* (London: Bloomsbury Caravel, 2017), 4.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 6–7.
- 30 A. Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 28.
- 31 Y.-H. Jan, “The Silk Manuscripts on Taoism”, *T’oung Pao*, 63 (1977), 75.

32 Chinese Metaphysics is based on a trinitarian dimension of Heaven, Earth and Man, in which Man stands for the “human world”. It is in this sense that this myth refers to “people on earth” too, that is, humans as opposed to Heaven (*Yang*) and Earth (*Yin*).

33 The Jesuits would have to work on the reform of the calendar and that would eventually bring misfortune to one of their main astronomers, Schall, who would be accused by some of his peers for being involved in it. Schall would complete the reform of the calendar in 1638. In 1649, missionaries Buglio and Magalhães would write to Rome accusing Schall of working with superstitious elements related to the Calendar in China, particularly the prediction of lucky days. Rome formed a commission to study the case, which would later proclaim a favorable decision, in 1659, confirming the Pope’s approval of the work of Schall in the Observatory and his condition as Mandarin of the Chinese court. Cf. M. de J. Espada, *op.cit.*; B. Elman, “Global Science and Comparative History: Jesuits, Science, and Philology in China and Europe 1550-1850”, *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine*, Brill, 2007, 9-16; L. Saraiva, C. Jami, *The Jesuits, the Padroado and East Asian Science (1552-1773)* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2008).

34 P. R. Goldin, “The Myth that China has no creation Myth”, *op. cit.*, 2.

35 D. C. Buxbaum, F. W. Mote (eds), “The Cosmological Gulf between China and the West”, *Transition and Permanence: Chinese History and Culture* (Hong Kong, 1972), as cited in P. R. Goldin, “The Myth that China has no Creation Myth”, *op. cit.*, 1.

36 C. Le Blanc, D. Borei (eds), *Essays on Chinese Civilization* (Princeton, 1981), 81, as cited in Paul R. Goldin, “The Myth that China has no Creation Myth”, *op. cit.*, 1.

37 M. Kalinowski, “Myth, Cosmogénèse et théogonie dans la Chine Ancienne”, *L’Homme*, 36/137 (1996) “Chine : Facettes d’identité”, 41-60.

38 Although Confucius (Kongzi) lived in the 6-5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Confucianism was suppressed during the Legalist and autocratic Qin Dynasty (221-206 B.C.) but survived. A Confucian revival began during the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

39 C. Le Blanc, D. Borei, *op. cit.*, 286.

40 D. L. Hall, R. T. Ames, *Anticipating China: Thinking Through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany, 1995), 11, as cited in P. R. Goldin, “The Myth that China has no Creation Myth”, *op. cit.*, 3.

41 In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Joseph Needham, a biochemist from the UK addressed the subject of why China did not develop a science to theorize and structure the knowledge that led to its technological inventions, and ended up reformulating this question as to “Why did China never experience a scientific revolution as Europe”. His studies led to a monumental work series named “Science and Civilisation in China”. Cf. J. Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1954).

42 J. Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. 2: *History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1956), 280-281.

43 *Ibid.*, 281.

44 “Laozi 25”, in M. Gao, *Boshu Laozi jiaozhu* (Beijing: Xinbian Zhuzhi jicheng, Zhongzhua shuju, 1996), 348-354, as cited in P. R. Goldin, “The Myth that China has no Creation Myth”, *op. cit.*, 4.

45 M. Gao, *Boshu Laozi Jiaozhu*, as cited in P. R. Goldin, “The Myth that China has no Creation Myth”, *op. cit.*, 5.

46 Chan, “Chapter 40: *Daodejing*”, in *Sourcebook*, 160, as cited in J. LIU, “The Status of Cosmic Principle (*Li*) in Neo-Confucian Metaphysics”, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 32/3 (2005), 393.

47 *Ibid.*

48 *Analects* 15.28 as cited in P. R. Goldin, *Confucianism* (New York: Routledge, Ancient Philosophies, 2014), 6; P. Ryckmans (translation, introduction and notes), *Les Entretiens* (Paris: Gallimard, Collection Folio Sagesses n° 6142, 2016).

49 *Ibid.*, 5.

50 J. C. Assis, *Ordem Cósmica: História de uma Ideia* (São Paulo: Baraúna, 2010), 51.

51 J. Liu, *op. cit.*, 394.

52 *Ibid.*, 395.

53 M. Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 170.

54 Leiden, 1660.

55 Amsterdam, 1667.



56 D. F. Lach, "Leibniz and China", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 6/4 (Oct. 1945), 437.

57 F. Verbiest (1623-1688) was a Jesuit missionary who would follow the work of Johann Adam Schall (1591-1666) in Beijing, teaching European science to Chinese astronomers and building astronomical instruments. Maria de J. Espada, *op. cit.*

58 D. F. Lach, "Leibniz and China", *op. cit.*, 439.

59 *Ibid.*

60 *Ibid.*, 444.

61 G. W. Leibniz, "Annotatio de quibusdam ludis...", *Miscellanea Berolinensia*, Volume I (1710), 25.

62 D. F. Lach, "Leibniz in China", 437.

63 The Kangxi Emperor (1622-1722), born Xuanye, was the second Emperor of the Qing Dynasty. He is considered one of China's greatest emperors. He suppressed the Revolt of the Three Feudatories, forced the Kingdom of Tungning (Dōngníng Wángguó) in Taiwan to surrender, and assorted Mongol rebels in the North and Northwest to submit to Qing rule. He was also in the center of the "Rites Controversy" that raised the question whether Chinese Christians could still take part in traditional Confucian ceremonies and ancestor worship, with the Jesuits arguing for tolerance but ending up with the Pope banning the Chinese Rites. On 19 March 1715, Pope Clement XI issued the papal bull *Ex illa die*, which officially condemned Chinese rites. Cf. S. Jr. Uhalley, X. WU (eds), *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future* (Routledge, 2015), 128-131.

64 Latin for "things medical", much probably referring to the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM).

65 Leibniz as cited by G. W. Leibniz, "Politische Schriften", in G. W. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe* (Darmstadt: Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Series IV, I, 1931), 552.

66 G. G. LEIBNIZ, *Opera Omnia* (L. Dutens (ed.), Geneva: Apud Fratres de Tournes, 1974, IV), 147, as cited in D. F. Lach, *op. cit.*, 444.

67 Leibniz to Bouvet, 15 February 1701, as cited in D. E. Mungello, *op. cit.*, 19.

68 J. Needham, *op. cit.*, 344.

69 As referred in Foucher de Careil (ed.), "Leibniz to Fontanelle", *Lettres et opuscules inédites de Leibniz précédées d'une introduction* (Paris: Mémoires

de l'Académie des Sciences, 1854), 225.

70 As cited in D. F. Lach, *op. cit.*, 444.

71 Paris, 1687.

72 D. E. Mungello, "Leibniz's Interpretation of Neo-Confucianism", *Philosophy East and West*, University of Hawai Press, 21/1 (1971), 3-22.

73 *Ibid.*

74 Figurism was an intellectual movement of Jesuit (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesuit>) missionaries at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, whose participants viewed the *I Ching* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I\\_Ching](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Ching)) as a prophetic book containing the mysteries of Christianity, and prioritized working with the Qing ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qing\\_Dynasty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qing_Dynasty)) Emperor (rather than with the Chinese literati) as a way of promoting Christianity in China.

75 Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci arrived in Macao, in 1582, and in Beijing, in 1601, together with Spanish Jesuit Diego de Pantoja (1571-1618), after having been invited by an officer of the Nanjing Tribunal of Rites to work on the reform of the Calendar. He would then offer his skills to work with astronomy, geography and mathematics to emperor Wanli. Cf. R. P.-C. Hsia, *Matteo Ricci and the Catholic Mission to China, 1583-1610: A Short History with Documents* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2016), 57-60.

76 Considering that Neo-Confucianism can be defined as an attempt to create a more rationalist and secular form of Confucianism, by rejecting superstitious and mystical elements of Daoism and Buddhism that had influenced Confucianism during and after the Han Dynasty.

77 Leibniz (to Bouvet?), as cited in D. E. Mungello, *op. cit.*, 7.

78 Leibniz to Remond, 27 March 1716, as cited in D. E. Mungello, *op. cit.*, 9.

79 As cited in D. F. Lach, *op. cit.*, 451.

80 J. M. Mesquita, *A Cosmogonia Chinesa numa visão comparada* (Edições Humus, 2017), 42.

## RÉSUMÉS

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## Français

L'intérêt des philosophes chinois pour la cosmogonie est ancien ; ils ont élaboré une succession de théories dominées d'une part par les cinq éléments (bois, feu, terre, métal et eau) et, de l'autre, par une cosmologie dualiste reposant sur l'idée de *Yin* et de *Yang*. On peut trouver, dès le IV<sup>e</sup> siècle av. J.-C., des références à des corrélations symboliques de la présence des cinq éléments, agissant comme des forces donnant forme au cosmos, et à des discussions sur la manière dont, par vagues successives tour à tour dominantes, opèrent le *Yin* et le *Yang* dans l'univers. D'une façon générale, ces théories dérivent de l'inclination chinoise pour la recherche de l'harmonie. Ces constructions mentales reflètent l'organisation sociale, en portant, entre autres, sur les structures de genre, les célébrations et les festivités, ainsi que sur la hiérarchie de la société.

La rivalité qui éclate, lors de la rencontre avec des astronomes européens, entre cosmologistes et novateurs astronomiques, met en présence les tenants de la pensée et la science traditionnelle chinoise, datée au moins du III<sup>e</sup> siècle av. J.-C., et ceux de la science mathématique et expérimentale européenne. À certains égards, cependant, elle fait naître, à partir des travaux des jésuites en Chine, un débat philosophique qui tend à rapprocher Leibniz du néoconfucianisme, lequel a trouvé son origine sous la dynastie Tang (entre 618 et 907) avec Han Yu et Li Ao, s'est poursuivi sous celle des Song (entre 960 et 1279), avec Zhou Dunyi et Zhu Xi, et celle des Ming (entre 1368 et 1644) avec Wang Yangming. C'est important de garder à l'esprit ces données, bien que cet article parle surtout ici de l'époque Qing (1644-1911) avec Leibniz.

Après un rapide survol des mythes cosmogoniques chinois, cet article se propose d'analyser comment, grâce à l'intermédiaire des jésuites, l'intérêt de Leibniz pour la Chine et le confucianisme a influencé sa pensée, tout autant que la représentation que les Européens se faisaient des textes classiques chinois consacrés à la cosmogonie.

## English

Chinese philosophers have long been interested in cosmogony, creating consecutive theories dominated by the five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal and water) on the one hand, and by a dualistic cosmology through the idea of *Yin* and *Yang* on the other. It is possible to find references, as early as the 4th century B.C., to symbolic correlations of the presence of the five elements acting as forces shaping the cosmos, and discussions about how the *Yin* and *Yang*

operated in the universe, first one then the other dominating in a wave-like succession. These theories derive in broad terms from the Chinese inclination to look for harmony. In social terms, these mental constructions reflect on the social organization, weighing on the gender structures, the celebrations and festivals, and the societal hierarchy, amongst others.

When encountering European astronomers, the rivalry between cosmologists and astronomical innovators confronts the philosophical thought and the traditional science from China, dated at least from the 3rd century B.C., and the mathematical and experimental scientist from Europe. In some respects, however, it awakens a philosophical debate which would bring Leibniz close to neoconfucianism, (originated in the Tang Dynasty between 618 and 907, with Han Yu and Li Ao, and followed by Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi in the Song Dynasty, between 960 and 1279, and by Wang Yangming in the Ming Dynasty, between 1368 and 1644), through the work of the Jesuits in China. It is important to keep these data in mind, although this article analyzes mainly the events occurred during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) that involved Leibniz and his thought.

This article intends to analyze how the interest of Leibniz in China and Confucianism, through the Jesuits, influenced his thought, as well as the European image of Chinese classic texts in what concerns cosmogony, after a swift glance at Chinese cosmogonic myths.

## INDEX

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### Mots-clés

cosmogonie, mythe, Leibniz, taoïsme, néo-confucianisme

### Keywords

cosmogony, myth, Leibniz, taoism, neo-confucianism

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