

Letter E

28 February 1698

Bouvet to Leibniz

(AA I xv: N 238)

At La Rochelle this

28 February 1698

Monsieur,

I can't express to you to what degree I felt the honor that you gave me by writing me as many as four times in less than three months. I am extremely vexed at not having been able to reply to the first two letters, which I received at the same time on the date of the second of December, nor to the questions of Reverend Father Kochanski that were joined to his letter. As I found it impossible then for me to do so, I beseeched Father Le Gobien, who is at present in the service of Father Verjus in the capacity of recorder for the China missions to China and the rest of the Orient and to whom we will henceforth address all of our memoirs, to substitute in my place until I had the opportunity of replying myself. I suppose that this father has fulfilled this duty and that he will regularly send you copies of all the reports that he will give to the public, as he has promised me.¹

As to the letter that you gave Monsieur de la Roziere for me, I have had no information at all about it, nor of Monsieur Menzelius' book.² I extremely regret this double loss. In regards to your last [letter], it has found me all the way here where I have

¹ Le Gobien did so and sent the answers on to Kochanski through Leibniz in a letter of 15 May 1698 (AA I xv: N 367).

² See Letter C.

come in order to embark on the same ship with eight other Jesuits³ who all have particular talents for working very effectively in China towards the conversion of the infidels and for providing to curious and scholarly persons like you, Monsieur, all of the knowledge that can be expected from that country for the perfection of the arts and the sciences. For this purpose I will not fail to relay to them the fine and very obliging letters with which you have already been so willing to honor me, and with which I hope you will agree to continue honoring us in the future. And as your views fortunately happen to be quite consistent with our own, I venture to pride myself that you will be happy with the care we will take to clarify all of the points that you may take the trouble to ask us, whether on your part or on the part of your friends. And I can assure you in advance that of all the French Jesuits, including those presently in China as well as those who are about to leave for there or who may go there in the future, there isn't one who will not be as honored and pleased to work towards this as much as we. It is of this that I beseech you to be thoroughly convinced; you can also assure this to all of your friends who have some taste for matters Chinese, and among others the celebrated Monsieur Menzelius, the renowned Monsieur Schrokus, and the Reverend Father Kochanski, to whom I beg you

³ The eight Jesuit Fathers who sailed on the “Amphitrite” with Bouvet were: Charles Dolzé (1663-1701), Louis Pernon (1664-1702), Jean-Charles-Etienne de Broissia (1660-1704), Jean Baptiste Régis (1663-1738), Joseph-Henri de Prémare (1666-1736), Dominique Parrenin (1665-1741), Philibert Geneix (1667-1699), the sculptor Charles de Belleville (1657-1730) and the Italian painter, Giovanni Gherardini (1654-1723?). For sources on this voyage, see Letter C, n. 2.

to extend my very humble respects which I offer here.⁴ I would give myself the honor of writing them each individually if, being as I am on the point of embarking, I could find a few moments of leisure.

If we land at Batavia I will not fail to grant myself the honor of going to see Monsieur Cleyer⁵ and personally giving him Monsieur Schrokus' letter. I will have a copy of it made so that we can for our part send you at the earliest the elucidation that is desired on what is noted. I could easily work on it from here if I had some time.

Father Grimaldi and Father Gerbillon will feel very indebted when they learn of the interest you wish to show them by the honor of your regards. I will remind the first of the promise which he made to you.⁶

What you tell me of your new arithmetical machine⁷ will greatly please Father Grimaldi and all the French Jesuits, but they will be very upset to remain uninformed of its artistry for perhaps several years.

⁴On Menzelius, see Letter C, n. 4. On Schrokus, see Letter D, n. 3.

⁵On Cleyer, see Letter D, n. 4.

⁶Since his earliest correspondence with Grimaldi, after meeting him in Rome in 1689, the latter had promised to answer his various letters and the many questions therein. However, he preferred to respond to Leibniz through intermediaries. See Letter B, n. 14.

⁷Leibniz must have discussed his calculating machine in the letter he wrote to Bouvet that is not extant. Leibniz had worked on such a machine since the early 1670's, finally perfecting one in 1693 that could perform all four arithmetical operations for up to eight

I have just reread this fine and ample letter which you did me the kindness of writing earlier.⁸ I was still more charmed by it than I had been the first time. And I am exceptionally pleased to see that all of the points which you honor us in proposing for clarification are precisely those which we have already proposed to apply ourselves to with more attention, because of the great results that can be inferred from them. It was with this in mind that Father Visdelou, who without exception is the most skilled missionary that we have in China in the understanding of the language and the characters, has undertaken to make a dictionary which will leave you nothing to desire in this matter; the grammar and the comments with which he will supplement it will make this work perfect.⁹ Whatever might be the key to the Chinese characters that M. Mullerus

digits. This was an improvement over the machines of Pascal and others of the time (on John Napier's "Rhabdologie," see Letter N, n. 14) which could only multiply by repeated additions and often required further calculations which were inevitably open to human error. On the other hand, "with my machine, the mind does virtually nothing, so that a child ... (not to say a monkey) could perform quite long multiplications." Letter to Cesar Caze, 23 June 1705, in Z 351-352. See Letter N, p. 5; for more details on Leibniz' calculating machines, Letter N, n. 13.

⁸Bouvet is referring to Letter B.

⁹Claude de Visdelou (1656-1737), one of the six French Jesuit mathematicians (including Bouvet) chosen for the first French China mission in 1685, was renowned among his fellow missionaries for his linguistic ability in Chinese. The mission, headed by Jean de Fontenay (1643-1710), included Gerbillon, Louis-Daniel Le Comte (1655-1728) and Guy Tachard (1648-1712). Tachard never made it to China, remaining in

promised,¹⁰ I have no doubt that we will succeed one day in making a perfect analysis of them and in breaking them down perhaps to the hieroglyphic characters of the Egyptians,¹¹ and that it will be demonstrated that one and the other both were the script

Siam. Visdelou later sided with Cardinal de Tournon's anti-accommodationist position and consequently was forced to leave China in 1709. He left the Society of Jesus, spending the rest of his life in Pondicherry, India. See D. Mungello, Curious Land. . ., p. 298, n. 171. The dictionary mentioned by Bouvet has not been found.

¹⁰On Müller's key, Letter B, n. 8.

¹¹Here we may have the first hints of Bouvet's later "Figurist" approach to Chinese writing and literature, influenced by the Hermetic tradition. The link between Chinese characters and Egyptian hieroglyphs is central to the Hermetic tradition, often known as the doctrine of Ancient Theology (prisca theologia). The leading proponent of this view in the 17th-Century was the German Jesuit and polymath, Athanasius Kircher, S.J.(1602-1680), who attempted to demonstrate in various works (e.g *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* [1652];*China illustrata* [1667]) that Chinese characters were derived ultimately from Egyptian hieroglyphs. For more information on this fascinating character, see Athansius Kircher: The Last Man Who Knew Everything, ed. Paula Findlen (NY: Routledge, 2004). Kircher was one of the early editors of Jesuit material coming out of China. His work, China monumentis, sacris qua profanis. . .illustrata.... (Amsterdam: Jacobum à Meurs,1667) was widely read at the time. He corresponded with Andreas Müller about the latter's so-called "Key to Chinese." See D. Mungello, Curious Land . . ., pp. 215-222 on the Müller-Kircher correspondence. On Müller, see Letter B, n. 8.

used among the learned before the flood.¹² We have already made some haste toward procuring the information you wish of China's neighboring languages, and there will be

Ancient Theology saw Hermes Trismegistus – supposedly an Egyptian contemporary of Moses – as beginning “a pagan tradition of divine knowledge, an ancient theology which paralleled and confirmed the revealed truth of Scripture.” (B. Copenhaver and C. Schmitt, A History of Western Philosophy, vol. III: Renaissance Philosophy [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 146.) Bouvet adapted this tradition, claiming that Fuxi, credited with inventing the trigrams of the *Yi jing* (considered by Bouvet to be the earliest Chinese writing), and Hermes were indeed the same person! Bouvet says in the next paragraph that this tradition furnishes him with “the true key” for unlocking the *Yi jing*. The proper understanding of these ancient characters will reveal “the principles of all sciences” and “the consummate system of a perfect metaphysics.” On Leibniz’s skeptical attitude concerning the historical basis for the doctrine of Ancient Theology, see D. J. Cook, ““Leibniz, China, and the Problem of Pagan Wisdom,” Philosophy East and West LXV (2015): 936-947. For more details on Bouvet’s Figurism, see Letter F, n. 20.

¹² “. . .whereas Kircher viewed the Egyptian hieroglyphs as the oldest language in the world, Fr. Bouvet judged the Chinese Classic *I ching* (Book of changes) of Fu-Hsi to be the oldest written work.” D.Mungello, Curious Land . . ., p.30. Bouvet accepts the Hermetic view that there is a strong family resemblance between the Chinese characters and the Egyptian hieroglyphs, but given his acceptance of the dates of Fu-Hsi as being much earlier than Moses, he pushes back this original Law-Giver and founder of writing to before the flood (see Letter B, n. 19), attributing it to one of the sons of Noah (usually

no delay in informing you as soon as is possible. We will add to it rather specific information for the revision of the map, especially of oriental Tartary to which I am not without hope to soon make an excursion myself, even as far as the so-called Strait of Anian [i.e., Bering Strait].¹³

The most important point to which we mean to apply ourselves is their chronology, which we will try to establish with all the thoroughness and precision

Shem) or even Adam's grandson Enoch. (It is unclear at this time whether this [Ur]"script" that Bouvet refers to is indeed the original Primitive or Adamic Language which people like Kircher were hoping to uncover by their investigations into non-Western ancient languages such as Hebrew, Egyptian or Chinese.) Bouvet's readiness to extend Hermeticism temporally (to before the Flood) and geographically (beyond the Mediterranean basin to China) show his budding Figurist view. As we shall see, this view will be further refined to include the notion that "Shem and his descendants brought God's law to East Asia, but there as elsewhere, human evil over a period of time had corrupted the revelation." D. Mungello, Curious Land . . ., p. 310. Thus apart from any divine revelation, those born closer to Creation had greater insight than those born later who were more corrupted by the Fall: "[A] separate revelation to the Chinese may possess more authority because of its being nearer to the beginning of the world when human beings were more receptive of the truth on account of less corrupted faculties." Yuen-ting Lai, "Religious Scepticism and China," in R. A. Watson and J. F. Force, eds., The Sceptical Mode in Modern Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1988), pp. 21-22.

¹³ The map referred to is Witsen's. See Letter B, n. 11.

possible.¹⁴ For this effect we intend to make a solid critique of the principal authors who wrote their histories and their chronicles, as according to your plan.¹⁵ After this we will work on their natural and civil history, on their physics, their ethics, their laws, their politics, their arts, their mathematics, and their medicine, which is one of the subjects on which I am convinced that China can furnish us with some of the best information. I speak of it this way because I am more attached to it than to any other. I even already have many notes on the above that I am taking back with me since I have not had the leisure to systematize them as I wished. I only left in the hands of Abbot Bignon¹⁶ the

¹⁴The importance of establishing a reliable chronology of Chinese history was paramount. Given the isolation and continuity of Chinese civilization, along with its rich documentation, it became extremely important for the Church to be able to accommodate these ancient sources to the Mosaic chronology of the OT. See note 12 above and Letter B, nn. 26-27.

¹⁵In his earlier letter (B) to Bouvet, Leibniz presents his plea for an accurate “Chinese literary history” solely in terms of the need to distinguish critically reliable sources. Leibniz consistently attempted to harmonize accepted scientific or historical findings with traditional biblical chronology. For example, note the efforts in his Protogaea to corroborate the biblical history of the Flood as well as of Creation from geological evidence. See G. W. Leibniz, Protogaea, ed. and trans. by C. Cohen and A. Wakefield (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), §§ III, V, VI et passim.

¹⁶Abbot Jean-Paul Bignon (1662-1743), director of the French Academy of Sciences and Arts at this time, was later editor of the Journal des Sçavans (1702). As Librarian to Louis

translation of a small treatise on the pulse which is in the front of the Chinese herbal which I put in the king's library.¹⁷ Father le Gobien has the rough copy of this translation along with the translation of the preface to this herbal, in which one can see all the design and economy of this work which is a complete corpus of the natural history of China.¹⁸

XIV from 1700, he was the guiding spirit in founding the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris (1708). He was the recipient as well as the intermediary for copies of Bouvet's later letters, including those directed to Leibniz (which the latter, however, never received). See C. von Collani, Eine Wissenschaftliche Akademie. . ., p. 16, n. 39; pp. 26-27, n. 97.

¹⁷ No such item appears in the bibliographies of Bouvet (e.g., Gatty and Pfister); he is probably referring to the translation of a classical medical work on diagnosis by means of *sdPulse*, also romanized as *Mai jing*). The translation (into Latin) would then be that of Father Michael Boym (1612-1659), a Polish Jesuit. For more on Boym (who has been called "The Last Envoy of the Ming Dynasty), see D. Mungello, Curious Land. . ., pp. 138-142.

¹⁸ This larger work, of which Boym's translation constituted the first and major part is most likely *Specimen medicinae Sinicae . . . continens I. De Pulsibus. . .*, edited by Andreas Cleyer (see note 56 to Leibniz's letter to Bouvet of 30 January 1698) in 1682. For further discussion and speculation on this matter, see Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée, "La transmission de l'herbier chinoise en Europe au XVIII Siècle," in Appréciation par l'Europe de la tradition chinoise: a partir du XVIIe siècle; Actes du IIIe Colloque international de sinologie (Chantilly, 1980), (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1983), pp. 177-194.

If I had had a bit of leisure I would have provided a solution to the riddle of the Chinese characters,¹⁹ that is, an analysis of the first characters of this nation composed of small whole and divided horizontal lines,²⁰ whose invention they attribute to Fuxi and for which I believe to have found the true key.²¹ These characters, the table of which Father Couplet presented in the preface to his *Confucius*,²² had been composed with marvelous

¹⁹The riddle (Oedipe) referred to here is a play on the title of Kircher's monumental three-volume work, Oedipus Aegyptiacus (Rome: Mascardus, 1652-1655). See notes 10 and 11 above.

²⁰Bouvet is referring to the hexagrams of the *Yi jing*, six-line figures that are composed of the sixty-four possible combinations of the symbols “___” and “_ _”. Bouvet thoroughly elaborates his ideas in the subsequent letters.

²¹See footnote 11 above for the historical background for Bouvet's “true key.” Leibniz received a full-blown exposition of Bouvet's theory in Letter I.

²²Philippe Couplet (1622/3-1693), a Belgian Jesuit, spent almost twenty years in China, and was appointed Procurator to the Jesuit mission in China in 1680, just before his departure for Europe. He directed and edited the translations of the Confucian classics of a group of Jesuit missionaries in China, entitled *Confucius Sinarum philosophus sive Scientia Latine exposita* (Paris, 1687). More than anyone else, he was instrumental in convincing Louis XIV (through his Confessor, Father François de la Chaise) to send the French Jesuit mission (which included Bouvet) to China in 1698. On Couplet, see J. Heyndrickx, Philippe Couplet S. J. (1623-1693), The Man Who Brought China to Europe (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1990). The table of the *Yi jing* that Bouvet is referring to is found in the “Introductory Exposition” (Proëmialis Declaratio), p. XLII. See Plate 19 in D. Mungello, Curious Land. . ., p. 323.

ingenuity and represent in a very simple and natural manner the principles of all the sciences; or rather, it is the consummate system of a perfect metaphysics, of which the Chinese, it seems, lost the knowledge a long time before Confucius.²³ Moreover, the true comprehension of this system or of these characters, for which the Chinese have a quite extraordinary esteem even though they don't understand them, could serve greatly not only to reestablish the principles of the true and legitimate philosophy of the ancient Chinese and to bring back perhaps all this nation to the knowledge of the true God, but also to establish the natural method that one must follow in all the sciences, or rather to rediscover the ancient one, by which I mean the one which was followed by the first men,

For more details of Couplet and the *Confucius Sinarum*. . ., see ibid., Chapter VIII, pp. 247-299.

²³ Bouvet later elaborates on his approach (see Letters G and I) to converting the Chinese by showing the proper meaning of their most ancient writing (viz., the 64 hexagrams of the *Yi jing*), which has been lost to them through later accretions and distortions. When they understand the mathematical and philosophical bases of their classical culture and religion, they will accept the Christian God, whose revelation of these basic characters and their proper interpretation through Hermes Trismegistus/Fu-Hsi has since been forgotten. Thus when the Chinese turn to Christianity, they will not be converting to a new religion (and thus have to jettison all their old beliefs), but returning to a purified version of their own religion.

when the lights of reason were the most pure.²⁴ In this you see, Monsieur, that I have the good fortune of sharing fully the same sentiment as you, namely that in order to prepare the minds of the Chinese to receive the true religion it is only necessary to teach them the philosophy of the ancients, including that of the ancient Chinese, which I believe is not different in any way from that [philosophy] which passes among us as the most solid and which takes into consideration matter and form;²⁵ for the ancient philosophy of the Chinese considers in nature only matter and movement, which is the same as form or what you call force, or the principle of action [orig. “principe de l’actios” in ms.] of natural things.²⁶

²⁴Bouvet’s eclecticism becomes apparent here. The divine sources of knowledge for him could be both the particular truths of revelation (as understood by Ancient Theology), as well as the universal truths to which all rational beings are privy. While these two positions are not incompatible, it should be noted that objectors to the belief in revealed pagan wisdom (i.e., Ancient Theology, Kabbala, etc.), often argued that anyone of a superior intellect could divine the truths of natural theology, whereas “the [revealed] knowledge of the true God,” could only be found in the Judeo-Christian tradition. On the other hand, those believing in ancient esoteric and neo-Platonic doctrines (e.g., Lull and his followers) could argue, as Bouvet does here, that those closer to the Fall had greater rational insight into reality since they were less removed that we are today from Adam and his earliest descendants, whose “reason remained as pure as it had been prior to the Fall.” Cited from D. Mungello, Curious Land. . ., p. 177. See notes 11-12 above.

²⁵See Letter B, nn. 33-34.

²⁶See Letter B, n. 35..

I have not at all found those papers where you tell me Kepler proposes researches to be done in China in astronomy, chronology, and geography. If you come across them you would give me much pleasure, Monsieur, by judging which are the most important points, in order to let us know.

You asked me for a Tartar version of the Lord's Prayer. Here is one which I just made in haste and which is not totally exact, for I forgot some words of the version which is commonly used.²⁷

[*****Here follows on a separate page Bouvet's version of the Lord's Prayer in romanized, transliterated, "Tartar" [i.e., Manchu] with an accompanying interlinear Latin text; this is followed by the Manchu text in Manchu script with accompanying interlinear transliteration. The Lord's Prayer is followed by six words in Manchu accompanied by a transliteration and one or several equivalencies in other languages, such as Chinese, German, Turkish, etc....*****]

I would like with all my heart to have a few more hours of leisure in order to satisfy more fully your curiosity on this matter and on several others. We will soon have, with God's help, the opportunity to do so in China, from which place we will be able to

²⁷ Bouvet first presents, line by line, the Lord's Prayer in Manchu along with the Latin transliteration. He then adds a list of words in Manchurian, along with their transliteration and translation into several languages (including Turkish, Mandarin and Latin).

send you complete vocabularies and grammars. In the meantime, I express to you a thousand thanksgivings for all the prayers you make to heaven for the fortunate success of my trip. If God hearkens to my own prayers, you will be filled with His favors both in this life and in the next. I am with all the respect and gratitude merited by all of your courtesies,

Monsieur,

Your very humble and very
obedient servant in our Lord,
J. Bouvet J.

