Thierry Meynard, S.J.

The Jesuit Reading of Confucius: The First Complete Translation of the Lunyu (1687)

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The Confucius Sinarum philosophus (Paris, 1687), edited by Philippe Couplet, S.J., and published under the patronage of King Louis XIV, is one of the foundation works of Western sinology as well as marking the culmination of the first century of Jesuit assimilation of Chinese culture. An English translation, even of part of the work, is therefore a major contribution to Chinese studies and to missiology as well as to Jesuit studies.

The Jesuit Reading of Confucius extends the work done by Meynard in his *Confucius Sinarum philosophus* (1687): *The First Translation of the Confucian Classics* (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 2011) which covered the “Preliminary Declaration,” “Life of Confucius,” and the *Daxue* (Great learning) section of that important Jesuit work. This time the most important of the Confucian “Four Books,” the *Lunyu*, is presented as in the earlier work, section by section: Chinese text, Latin translation in commentary, and an English translation of the Latin, and again, as in the previous work, with abundant notes, an extended introduction and bibliography. Here, there is also a vocabulary of key Chinese words and an index; and the “Life of Confucius” in the original Latin and English translation is repeated.

However, apart from its historical significance, what does *The Jesuit Reading of Confucius* offer to the contemporary reader? As an historian of the Jesuits in China I expected—and I was not disappointed—abundant material for a judicious assessment of the intentions and success of what has been loosely called Jesuit “accommodation.” How much had the Jesuit missionaries learned about Chinese culture and society since 1580? How far, if at all, did they have to distort Chinese perceptions of the world and Chinese values to present to a European public what was probably the most important single work in the mainstream Chinese tradition, the so-called Analects (or “Collected Sayings”) of Master Kong, whom they labelled “Confucius,” to a European audience? By 1687, it was already clear that there was a renewed attack on the Chinese Jesuits over their approval and defense of Confucian rituals. Blaise Pascal’s *Lettres provinciales* (1656–57), Navarrete’s *Tratados* (1676), and especially the *Morale pratique des jésuites* (1669) were signals of a revival of old charges they believed long refuted.

Meynard is no apologist for the Jesuits’ position. He frequently points, in his abundant footnotes, to places where a Christianizing interpretation has been placed on passages in the ancient text. In fact, in my opinion, too frequently, since I would argue that the original texts are often fully consonant with such readings and the translations no more and no less distorted than in many

contemporary post-modern or rationalizing readings. A translation is always and inevitably a transfer from one thought-world to another. Meynard demonstrates by his exhaustive detective work on the sources in Chinese commentaries of many of the extended interpretations inserted in the “translations” that while the team of Jesuit translators led by Couplet drew eclectically on several commentaries to compile their elaborated expositions of the texts and sometimes omitted parts that clashed with their religious views, they cannot be accused of deliberate distortion.

The resulting method makes Couplet’s edition of the *Confucius Sinarum philosophus* unsuitable for student use as a translation of the *Lunyu*. This was not altogether the fault of Couplet and his collaborators. Their original intention, which proved impractical for Western printers, was to include the Chinese text and use a system of numbers to indicate which words of the Latin translation corresponded to which words in the text. In any passage that would have revealed that the vast bulk—perhaps as much as ninety percent of the words were amplification, explanation, and extraneous commentary on the extremely succinct originals.

And this brings us to what I regard as a major omission in Thierry Meynard’s otherwise exhaustive and illuminating edition of the *Confucius Sinarum philosophus*. I greatly appreciated the many notes on key issues such as the Jesuit translation of the Chinese term *sheng* as *sanctus* or *miao* as *aula*. However, I was not so convinced that *sanctus* is best rendered in English as “saint” or that *miao* is always properly translated as “temple.” Context is all. There are very few places where I felt the English translation was erroneous but many where I was worried about the resonance, the feeling or tone of the English expression chosen.

One very valuable use which could be made of this work is to pursue the inter-linguistic problems it raises, the issues revealed in a Latin translation of a Chinese text which was itself then translated into English by someone who, while extremely proficient in all three languages, is a native French speaker. Classical Chinese is delightfully succinct, referential, allusive, even a kind of incantation, and there can be no definitive univocal translation of a sentence in the *Lunyu*. Classical Latin is closer to this style than the Scholastic Latin found in this seventeenth-century work. And this over and above the age-old question of new meanings acquired in new historical contexts. Meynard’s notes point up the many slips that later commentators, Chinese as well as Jesuit, made in unconsciously placing a pre-unification text into the context of a powerful unified imperial state.

The genius of classical Chinese is its indeterminacy. This is only to some extent allayed by the “particles,” which are more indicators of mood than tense,

number or other grammatical features, and by word order. The genius of Latin, on the other hand, lies in precision, its conjunctions and declensions and linking words. It is interesting that the court Jesuits slightly after 1687 were delighted by the appearance in the “inner court” circles they frequented of the first Manchu translations of key Chinese works. Here, they thought, were translations into an inflected language which would give access with greater precision to the understanding of these texts by bilingual (Sino-Manchu) scholars in the imperial household. It is also at just this period that there began—some have even suggested under the influence of Western text-critical scholarly methods introduced by the Jesuits—the “Han Learning” movement which advocated a return to philological rather than philosophical commentarial methods.

Meynard emphasizes the Jesuit presentation of Confucius as a *philosophus*. I wonder whether this was entirely tactical, i.e. to distance their Confucius from idolatry, even religion. “Philosophy” for them, educated in the Greek and Latin classics and a Christian humanist tradition, was not the antithesis of theology or religion. They were thoroughly imbued in the “natural religion” paradigm and their Aristotelian/Thomistic training was opposed to the rising tide of Augustinian pessimism in Europe. “Philosophy” for them meant the pursuit of wisdom in all its ramifications including knowledge and worship of God in so far as the light of reason could take people not exposed to the Gospel. Even Zhu Xi, one of the two major commentators used by the Jesuits, as Julia Ching has shown in *The Religious Thought of Chu Hsi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Daniel Gardner in his several translations of Zhu’s essays and conversations (see *Zhu Xi’s Reading of the Analects: Canon, Commentary, and the Confucian Tradition* [Columbia University Press, 2003]), is far from the hard-line materialist depicted by some of the Jesuit missionaries. His interest in what today we would call “spirituality” is clear, and to approach the Ultimate through cosmological concepts like *li* and *Taiji* is no more Godless than going through what Aristotle, who was for most European Christians “the Philosopher,” called “the First Cause.”

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