Book Review Essays

Translating Human and Divine Nature between Europe and China

Giulio Aleni

A Brief Introduction to the Study of Human Nature, trans. and annot. Thierry Meynard, S.J., and Dawei Pan. *Jesuit Studies*, 29. Leiden: Brill, 2020. Pp. xxviii, 400, 10 ills., 8 tables. Hb, \$179.00.

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Chinese Theology and Translation: The Christianity of the Jesuit Figurists and Their Christianized Yijing. Routledge Studies in Asian Religion and Philosophy, 26. New York: Routledge, 2019. Pp. 166, 11 ills. Hb, \$160.00.

In his chapter on Jesuit translation for John W. O'Malley's *The Jesuits II*, Peter Burke counted more than six hundred printed translations by writers of the Society in the early modern period, and some 260 Jesuit translators, noting that it was during his wider research into early modern translations that the Jesuit dimension became salient.¹ The historical significance of Jesuit translation both for the history of the Society and of global Christianity is obvious. Burke points to Robert Bellarmine's *Catechism*, translated into seventeen non-European languages, including Arabic, Bikol, Congolese, Coptic, Malagasi, Tagalog, and Tamil. This activity, of course, is closely related to the pioneering and prodigious work of missionaries of the order as field linguists and writers of dictionaries and grammars, from the Americas to East Asia. But we should not neglect to notice their production of original literary works in those languages.

¹ Peter Burke, "The Jesuits and the Art of Translation in Early Modern Europe," in John W. O'Malley, S.J. et al., eds., *The Jesuits II: Cultures Sciences and Arts: 1540-1773* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2006), 24-32.

To give just one example, Constantino Beschi (1680–1747), Jesuit missionary in southern India, wrote an epic on the life of St. Joseph, “Thembavani,” which is considered a classic in High Tamil. (He also translated the ethical ballad of an ancient Tamil poet, Tiruvalluvar, into Latin.)

The Jesuit “Figurist,” Joseph Henri Marie de Prémare (1666–1736) was the first, it seems, to have translated a Chinese play into any European language: *L’Orphelin de la Maison de Tchao* (published in 1731 by his confrère, Jean-Baptiste du Halde [1674–1743], without permission). The thirteenth-century revenge drama was subsequently translated/ paraphrased in English, Italian, and other languages.² In 1753, Voltaire rewrote it as *L’Orphelin de la Chine: La morale de Confucius en cinq actes*, emphasizing Confucian values, and updating the setting to render the Chinese civilization more Enlightenment-friendly. But perhaps the most celebrated example of Jesuit translation as cultural translation was the *Confucius Sinarum philosophus, sive, scientia Sinensis latine exposita* (Confucius the philosopher of China, or, the knowledge of China translated into Latin; Paris, 1687), by Jesuits Philippe Couplet (1623–93), Christian Herdtrich (1625–84), Prospero Intorcetta (1625–96), and Francis Rougemont (1624–76), dedicated to Louis XIV.³ European readers would have to wait for (Jesuit) François Noël’s *Sinensis Imperii libri classici sex* (The six classic books of the Chinese empire; Prague, 1711) and its vernacular translations for a less ideologically loaded version of the Confucian classics. While Burke is correct that scholarly attention has been paid to “acute problems of translating theological concepts into the language of the mission field,” there is, in fact, much more to be done, even in what he deems the “well cultivated fields of China, Japan and the Americas” (25). The two studies reviewed in this essay, of works rendered into/ in Chinese, illustrate the rich variety of Jesuit translational practice within the shifting contexts of the China mission.

The Italian Jesuit Giulio Aleni (1582–1649) embarked from Portugal for the Far East in 1609; ten years later the *Cursus Conimbricensis* (commentaries on the works of Aristotle produced at the College of Coimbra in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) arrived in China; in 1623–24, Aleni began work on his Chinese version of those volumes dealing with “anthropology,” viz. the *De anima* and *Parva naturalia*, by Manuel de Góis (1543–97).

2 See Yu, Shiao-ling, “The Orphan of Zhao: Chinese Revenge Drama and European Adaptations,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 55, no. 1 (2018): 144–71.

3 Readers may consult Thierry Meynard’s *Confucius Sinarum philosophus: The First Translation of the Chinese Classics* (Rome: IHSI, 2011) and *The Jesuit Reading of Confucius: The First Complete Translation of the Lunyu (1687) Published in the West* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), the latter reviewed in this journal by Paul Rule (*JJS* 3, no. 2 [2016]: 279–368; https://brill.com/view/journals/jjs/3/2/article-p285_7.xml).

As the authors of the present edition make clear, though, Aleni's *Xinxue cushu* (Brief introduction to the study of human nature, 1646), also draws on different parts of the *Cursus Conimbricensis*; on other works by European Jesuits, Chinese Catholics, and Confucian physicians; and on conversations with Chinese scholars. The first *juan*, for example, departs from the Coimbra Ur-text to discuss a matter of special interest to the Chinese, the difference between the Western intellectualive soul and the *qi*. Formally, Aleni's treatise is more catechetical than exegetical—"it may be asked [...] the answer is," and "someone asked [...] I answered"—something of a generic hybrid of *quaestio disputata* and humanist dialogue. Its final cause, as it were, is convincing the *literati* of the late Ming of the compatibility of Christian Scholasticism with Confucianism; more specifically, of the immateriality and immortality of the individual soul.

Aleni's *Xinxue cushu* represents one pole of an unresolved controversy within the Society of Jesus in China on the terms to use when translating Christian concepts of God, soul, mind, heart, etc.—by simple transliteration of Latin words or cautious adoption of Indigenous concepts? Aleni's compatriots and confrères Nicolò Longobardo (1559–1654) and Francesco Sambiasi (1582–1649) were convinced that Chinese philosophy had no equivalent of the Western incorporeal soul and that, accordingly, transliteration was more appropriate than adaptation. In Sambiasi's "rival" treatise to Aleni's, the *Lingyan lishao* (1624), "ya-ni-ma" (for Latin *anima*) is used some two hundred times, the Chinese *linghun* only twenty-two. One of the strategies identified in Aleni's text by Meynard and Pan, "selective framing," aims to soften the impact of the non-material intellectualive soul by effectively changing the subject. Rather than confronting the issue of Aristotelian-Thomistic "intellective memory" (which has no bodily location), Aleni chips away at Chinese cardiocentrism—is (sensitive) memory (viz. which is shared by humans and animals) located in the heart or the brain? To the extent that his treatise emphasizes morals over metaphysics and caters to the medical interests of his Chinese audience—an increasingly important area of intellectual life since the rise of neo-Confucianism in the eleventh century (18)—he may be felt to fail in his presumed goal of persuading them to accept the Thomistic-Christian doctrine of the soul. We might even speak of a selective *reception* of Aleni's text, which seems to have attracted attention mainly from physicians, for its novel theory of brain-centered memory. But this begs the question of the Jesuit's "true" motives for writing. Aleni may have been content to have drawn contemporary Chinese intellectuals into a wider web of Christian discourse—creating common ground for future conversations (and conversions), rather than clinching Scholastic arguments.

The volume in review opens with a foreword by Mario S. de Carvalho which is, in fact, a substantial chapter in its own right, furnishing the European background to Aleni's work: a potted history of the *Cursus Conimbricensis*, why it was favored for translation in the East, and the relationship of Aleni's *Brief Introduction* not only to de Góis's commentaries but to the larger Coimbra corpus. Meynard's and Pan's introduction covers earlier adaptations of European discourses on the soul in Japan, i.e. Alessandro Valignano's and Luís Fróis's (1532–1597) *Catechismus Japonensis*, oriented to the different needs of the Japanese mission and culture, and Pedro Gómez's *Compendium catholicae veritatis*, including the (not-so) *Breve compendium* on the *De anima*; controversies about the soul among the Jesuits in China, and the conception of the *Conimbricensis* translation project there; the publication history of Aleni's treatise (and its paratexts); the "encounter" of Western and Eastern medicine; a comparison of Aleni's *Xingxue cushu* with Sambiasi's and Xu's contemporaneous *Lingyan lishao*; and finally, an assessment of the cultural impact of the *Xingxue cushu*. Meynard and Pan point, for example, to the hitherto unnoted reliance on Aleni's treatise by the crypto-Catholic Manchu prince, Aisin-Gioro Dapei (1688–1752).

This volume will be of primary interest, of course, to historians of the Society and the reception of Christianity (and Western philosophy) in China. It is well produced, and its parts well coordinated (with the exception of a curious discrepancy between foreword and introduction on whether or not Aleni actually visited Coimbra). The Chinese text was established by Huang Zhipeng, who completed his doctoral dissertation on the translation of the Aristotelian doctrine of the soul and its reception in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties in 2018 (Sun Yat-sen University). The English translation is explicit and easy to read. Footnotes to the en-face edition are concise yet informative for those without a prior knowledge of Chinese philosophy; Chinese terms and titles are translated. A slightly fuller discussion of Aleni's earlier works (and correspondence?) may have shed further light on exactly what exactly he hoped to achieve with his translation. The editors concede that the *Xinxue cushu* was composed for a small and elite readership of Ming intellectuals. It is at any rate a remarkable document in the history of cross-cultural translation, rich in what it reveals of Jesuit ways of transmitting and, in the responses it elicited, Chinese ways of "receiving" Western philosophy.

Aleni, born in the year of Matteo Ricci's death (and indeed the author of his biography), belongs to the tail end of the Ming phase of Jesuit missionary activity in China; the Jesuits operating under the succeeding Qing dynasty adopted more radical strategies of cultural translation. The French "Figurists" of the late seventeenth/ early eighteenth century are the subject of Wei's book, primarily Joachim Bouvet (1656–1713) and Joseph Henri Marie

de Prémare (1666–1736), a fascinating page in the history of Jesuit accommodation. Turning from Aristotelianism to neo-Platonism and Hermeticism, and channeling Renaissance “ancient theology” (*prisca theologia*) through the oeuvre of baroque Jesuit polymath, Athanasius Kircher, the Figurists merged early Chinese sages with biblical patriarchs to argue not only that Chinese civilization had prefigured Christianity, but that the Chinese were a chosen people equal in status to the Jews—indeed, they were the race upon whom God had smiled the most. Unfortunately, they had forgotten their monotheistic origins because of cultural contamination by Buddhism, wars, and the corruption of their chronology by Sima Qian (c.145–c.86 BCE). Yet reflections of the true light could be recovered from the classic books, including one previously dismissed as a frivolous manual of fortunes, the *Yijing* (Book of changes, late ninth century BCE). It is the Figurists’ interpretations of this notoriously multisemous text, which is the focus of Wei’s study.

Chinese Theology and Translation is an up-dated revision of the author’s PhD thesis. Wei brings a much-needed Sinological perspective to the Figurist enterprise, one informed by her close engagement with unpublished manuscript sources in Rome and France and her personal studies in the Chinese classics. Where European scholars have dealt almost exclusively with the Figurists’ Latin and French writings, Wei turns to their Chinese manuscripts, highlighting their mastery of classical Chinese and emulation of elite scholarly practices to impress the Kangxi emperor and contemporary *literati*. Of particular importance is her attention to the Figurists’ manipulation of the written space—calligraphy, *mise en page*, and marginalia. This fifth chapter also contains an account of her autopsies of the manuscripts in the Vatican, ARSI, BNF, and Jesuit archives, Vanves, and new hypotheses on their chronology. The complexity of the translation activities undertaken by the Figurists is truly extraordinary. In addition to interlingual rendering/ transliteration of Christian concepts into Chinese (such as we met in Meynard’s and Pan’s volume) they practiced various forms of *intralingual* translation (paraphrastic interpretation *in* Chinese). Not only did they write dictionaries and grammars, mastering different topolects and registers, they followed scholarly tradition by laying out their interpretations of the *Yijing* in a format that would appeal to their learned readers (including the Kangxi Emperor), adducing classical, *literati*, and folk sources.

The Figurists scoured Chinese classical myths and legends for pointers to the coming of Jesus, transforming him into a Confucian sage who demonstrated *zhong* (loyalty, treating people well) and *xiao* (filial piety) towards God, *Da Fumu* (Big father and mother). Unlike Ricci’s, their syncretism extended to Daoism. They found in the “Dao” an echo of the Latin “Deus.” Bouvet extracted the Christian Trinity *Yi San* from the Daoist *San Yi*. It would be interesting to

know the extent to which these interpretations build on or depart from those advanced by the authors of the *Confucius Sinarum philosophus*. Indeed, the generation of Couplet and his collaborators is a curious omission from Wei's study and account of pre-Figurist Jesuit accommodation. For religio-political reasons why Kircher in Rome and the Jesuit missionaries in China may have turned to the "ancient theology" at this time, see now Giuliano Mori, "Natural Theology and Ancient Theology in the Jesuit China Mission," *Intellectual History Review* 30, no. 2 (2020): 187–208.

In their intralingual translations, mimicry of manuscript conventions, and esoteric numerological speculations, the Figurists spun a dense web of symbolic connections in which they themselves seem ultimately to have been snared. Wei, at least, is convinced that *they* were convinced by their own scholarly performances. In the end, they neither converted the emperor nor pleased their coreligionaries. After all, as Wei points out, their eager appropriation of the Chinese classics entailed some rather controversial corollaries, not least that the Chinese had knowledge of God two thousand years before the birth of Christ; that they already practiced the essence of Christianity; and that they might serve as exemplars to all Christians. Nevertheless, the fanning of their research endeavors by the scholarly and shrewd Kangxi emperor, who seems to have maneuvered them as pawns in his dealings with the Roman Church, and the alternating currents of envy and friendship they experienced from the *literati*, who either promoted or denigrated their literary and numerological experiments, certainly makes for a compelling episode in the comparative history of scholarly emotions.

A touching letter from Daohua Wang to Joachim Bouvet, translated by the author, offers condolences for his headaches and acknowledges the great distance he has travelled "to extend your studies to illuminate the meaning of your religion" (105).

This is a slim but sometimes demanding book for the uninitiated reader. The European background of the Figurists is more or less taken as read. For a sense of where these missionaries were coming from, their biographies, and the reception of their ideas in Europe, one must turn to the studies of Ludbaek, von Collani, Witek, and others.⁴ At the same time, while Meynard's and Pan's volume addresses readers with at least a passing acquaintance with

4 John W. Witek, S.J., *Controversial Ideas in China and in Europe: Biography of François Foucquet, SJ, 1665–1741*, Bibliotheca Instituti Historici S.I., 43 (Rome: IHSI, 1982); Claudia von Collani, *P. Joachim Bouvet, S.J.: Sein Leben und sein Werk* (Nettetal: Steyler, 1985); Knud Lundbaek, *Joseph de Prémare (1666–1736), S.J.: Chinese Philology and Figurism* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1991).

the Thomistic tradition, Wei's assumes a basic cultural knowledge of the *Yijing* and Chinese classics. The prose and translations are clear enough, although there are some lapses in English idiom and transcriptions from European languages that should have been caught by a good copyeditor. That said, a certain Chinese flavor to the writing, in addition to its original scholarly emphases, enhances the reader's sense of seeing the Figurists from the "other" side. Each chapter opens with an extended translation of an interpretation of a hexagram from the *Yijing* by Joachim Bouvet, a nice framing device which parallels the process of "unpacking" the Chinese text practiced by the Figurists. Given the book's monographic structure it is odd that the publisher has chosen to print bibliographical references at the end of each chapter, rather than at the end of the volume.

Finally, Wei's book raises larger questions about the varieties and commensurability of translation practices across cultures. She identifies indigenous Chinese modes of translation corresponding to two of Roman Jakobsen's three types, the "interlingual" and "intralingual" (the latter, as we have seen, is applied to the Jesuits' interpretative paraphrases/ commentaries of the *Yijing*).⁵ She points, for example, to the *yanyi* (historical novels, romances) (re-)composed by Ming *literati* from ancient sources. It might be interesting to compare these Chinese modes of "re-writing" their classics with the sorts of intertextual and ideological work that Renaissance Christian humanists and, later, Jesuits, did in their neo-Latin imitations of the pagan classics. But what of the third type of translation in Jakobsen's triad, the "intersemiotic"? Given the explicit connection made by the Figurists between hieroglyphics and Chinese characters, is it too far-fetched to see in their "classic" exegesis of the *Yijing* (viz. by judgment, text, and image) a faint intersemiotic imprint of the Renaissance emblem book—a genre upon which the Society had put its distinctive stamp in the early modern period? Be that as it may, the trajectories of Jesuit translation, like the beams reflected in the mystical mirrors of Kircher's *Ars magna lucis et umbrae* (Rome, 1646)—the "mirror" was a favorite symbol/ genre for the Figurists with its counterpart in Chinese literature⁶—were rarely unidirectional.

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5 Roman Jakobsen, "On linguistic Aspects of Translation," in Reuben A. Brower, ed., *On Translation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 232–39.

6 See Wei's discussion of the parallel European and Chinese genres of "mirror" and *jian* (30–34).