1. Encounter between Catholicism and Confucianism

Even before East Asia came under the sway of European imperialism, an important exchange of ideas and culture had taken place between Europe and East Asia. To give an example, Chinese porcelain and styles became very fashionable in Europe during the 17th and 18th century. This fascination with China became known in the history of art and culture as Chinoiserie, yet it also had an impact in the fields of philosophy, religion and political thought.¹ In fact, it also had a remarkable impact on East Asia. H.G. Creel, a well-known sinologist, holds that this was the beginning of modernity in China.² This might be somewhat exaggerated, but there is little doubt that Western thought had a strong impact on the philosophy and religion of East Asia. Thus, the encounter between Europe and East Asia that began during the European Enlightenment left its mark in Europe as well as in East Asia. In this paper, I will exemplify this encounter in the thought of two thinkers, namely Christian Wolff (1679–1754) und Chŏng Yag-yong (1762–1836).

Christian Wolff together with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz was a key figure in Europe’s philosophical encounter with Confucianism. His speech on the “Practical Philosophy of the Chinese” in 1721 was a heyday in the positive reception of Confucianism in Germany. Chŏng Yag-yong, on the other hand, was a Korean thinker and philosopher

and is considered a pioneer of Korean modernity. He was the first scholar in Korea to adopt the Catholic faith.

The most important link in the encounter between East Asia and Europe was Matteo Ricci. He was the founder of the Jesuit mission in China. Through his method of accommodation, his aim was to harmonise the spiritual bases of Chinese and European philosophy. ³

Both Christian Wolff and Chŏng Yag-yong were greatly impressed by Matteo Ricci’s writings on China, Confucianism and, respectively, on European religion, philosophy and science. It is not the purpose of this paper to corroborate a direct line of causality between the ways of thinking of these scholars, nor to present a comprehensive analysis of the impacts and effects of each case. Instead, I will focus on the contexts within which imported ideas were articulated with the thought of Wolff and Chŏng. This is not a matter of discussing whether the interpretations of these two authors were right or wrong, which, at least in the case of Confucianism, is practically impossible, as Confucianism, because of its discursive character, allows for many interpretations. Instead, I will try to determine the place and function of alien concepts in the thought of these two thinkers.

2. Discursive Properties of Confucianism and Matteo Ricci

In his treatise “The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven” (Tianzhu shiyi), published in 1595, Ricci makes frequent references to Chinese classics and distinguishes between the original thought of Confucius and the materialism of the then dominant Neo-Confucian school of Zhu Xi, also called Xingli School, which, in his opinion, had been influenced by Buddhism.

Ricci criticises Chu Hsi by means of Aristotelian metaphysics and Thomist logic in the sense that the founding principle li could not be identical to the creator of the world order, as it did not even have any substance itself, but and merely was an element dependent on things (Dinge). ⁴ He maintains that Zhu Xi’s thought not only was completely alien to Christian thought, but that furthermore, the former did not even have a basis in the Confucian classics. Based on this discrepancy,

⁴ Ricci 1999, chap. 2–8, 87–89.