The core of the present volume (183–341) is a punctuated edition (alongside an annotated English translation) of the Dadao jiyan [Illustrations of the Grand Dao] (1636), the product of a collaboration between the Jesuit missionary Alfonso Vagnone and the Chinese Christian scholar-official Han Yun. The Dadao jiyan is a collection of 355 sayings and chreiai (moral stories attributed to famous historical figures), arranged according to the Five Confucian Relationships: rulers and officials (158 entries, pp. 186–252), fathers and sons (twenty-one entries, pp. 253–264), brothers, including the specific interactions of younger and older siblings (thirty-one entries, pp. 264–277), husbands and wives (twenty-three entries, pp. 278–289), and friends, including chreiai on flattery, favoritism, and reprimands (122 entries, pp. 289–341). The volume closes (342–344) with two tables: the first classifies the chreiai by the figures identified therein, and the second by source, in addition to a bibliography (345–368) and an index of names (369–373).

Annotations supply the (probable) sources of around fifty-six percent of the sayings and chreiai, originating in twenty-nine primarily Greco-Roman authors (151). Most quoted, with forty-four appearances, is Plutarch’s Moralia (101). The relatively large portion remaining unidentified may be attributed to the fact that “the Jesuits were adept at creating chreiai or at least anecdotes tinged with features of this genre” (33, 102–103).

Two essays precede the text: Sher-shiueh Li’s “Ming Jesuit chreia in Chinese: An analysis of its types and functions” (11–96) and Thierry Meynard’s “Illustrations of the Grand Dao: A book of rhetoric and morality in Late Ming China” (97–182). Li’s essay is based primarily on a Chinese edition, published in 2005 (12n4) and reprinted with slight revisions in 2010. The first half of the present essay is largely a reprint of the English translation version print in 2005 (354). The second section (50–96), not included in previous translations, seeks “to study the Jesuit use of chreiai characters through Diogenes, Socrates and Alexander” (52). Li stresses the interplay between history and rhetoric (39): exercises in rhetoric being a key feature of European classrooms (42), “encourag[ing] students to expand, or to elaborate upon, a given chreia (44), so “that different chreiai authors would ‘create’ different chreiai with almost the same plot” (48).

In his amplification of chreiai, Vagnone derived more from Chinese ethical principles than from the European tradition, so that “what Diogenes utters in
Vagnone’s version will necessarily differ from what he has said in the Western tradition” (28). Li’s essay does not confine itself to the Dadao jiyan (ten examples cited), drawing further evidence from Vagnone’s Qijia xixue and Diego de Pantoja’s Qike (eight examples from each). In the 2005 Chinese version, Li also quoted another Chinese-language chreic collection, Vagnone’s Lixue guyan (16), but for unexplained reasons this text has all but disappeared, mentioned only in footnotes.

While Li focuses on the literary-historical aspects of the chreia as a genre, Meynard deals specifically with the Dadao jiyan. Though ostensibly a book of rhetorical (98–116) and moral instruction (117–131), the Dadao jiyan became part of the political project of a new Christian-Confucian ‘community compact,’ aimed at revitalizing the Ming dynasty, especially in the Shanxi area (131–147). Like Li, Meynard stresses that the chreiai of the Dadao jiyan, although rooted in the Western rhetorical tradition, have been substantially transformed. Vagnone probably used multiple commonplace books (116), themselves creative works in their own right (104, 107).

As a tool, rhetoric was crucial to the Jesuit missions (109); in Vagnone’s attempts to render Western thought into Chinese, the chreia was nothing less than providential (111). The Dadao jiyan is a hybrid between a Western commonplace book and a Chinese morality book (145), the result of a complex interaction between the literary, moral, and political traditions of both societies (147). The immediate inspiration for the Dadao jiyan was the Stoic tradition (117–118), but the prominence of Stoicism in the section on friendship gives a distorted view of Western ethics (182). The intricacy of the dialogue between the two traditions is confirmed by the fact that no single work reproduces the sayings and chreiai of the Dadao jiyan in their entirety (151).

The real foci of the Dadao jiyan (143) are the relationships between rulers and officials (152–166) and between friends (176–182). The selection of chreiai is generally intended to appeal to the ruler, so as to maximize the potential impact of Western ethics in the country (181). Such political considerations permeated the other relationships, as Meynard observes: “The Dadao jiyan seems to endorse the position held by the followers of Wang Yangming on the importance of friendship. But while they looked at it as a relation between equals, the Dadao jiyan stressed the hierarchical dimension of this relation. This emphasis on hierarchy, making the friend-friend relation more like the ruler-official relation, may have been a conscious attempt to fit into the Chinese socio-political moral order” (180).

A few bibliographical errors mar Meynard’s essay. While he rightly remarks that until recently the Dadao jiyan had gone unstudied, the assertion (made without any explanation or indication of a source) that it “was re-edited in the