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Associate Professor at the Sun Yat-Sen University (Canton, China) invited by the Assembly of the Professors on the proposition of Prof Anne Cheng He gave in February 2010 one lecture entitled: « Confucius Sinarum Philosophus », The first translation of the *Analects* in Europe



The publication in Paris of *Confucius, Philosopher of the Chinese* (*Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, 1687) marked the beginning of European sinology. This work, which may truly be called an encyclopedia of Chinese thought, was the result of one hundred years of collective efforts by Jesuit missionaries in China. Notably, it presented the *Analects* of Confucius, translated into Latin and presented with commentaries from the Song and Ming dynasties, in Europe for the first time. The book spread the name of Confucius, a Latin transliteration of Master Kong, throughout Europe. It subsequently had a great influence on intellectuals such as Pierre Bayle, Malebranche, Leibniz, and Voltaire, imposing upon them the image of a philosophical China—an image which remained until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

First, we examined earlier translations of Confucian texts into Western languages, such as the *Sapientia Sinica* (1662) and the *Sinarum Scientia Politico-moralis* (1668-1669). These translations were initially used as manuals for teaching language and culture, then as documentary evidence in support of the missionary policy of inculturation. The decision to provide literal, word for word, translations allowed Jesuits to remain close to the original meaning of the texts, even if there were, at times, some inflections in those meanings.

We then examined the editorial decision to present the classical text together with its interlinear commentaries in the *Sinarum Philosophus*. We showed that this method of combining a classical text with its commentaries was supported by a long hermeneutical tradition in China. We asked how this method was different from the way in which the Classics were read in Europe, and what kind of relationship it may have produced with the text.

Moving from form to content, we analyzed the image of Confucius as found in the translation, and compared it with that found in the classical text and its Chinese commentaries. In particular, we raised the following question: is the presentation of Confucius as a philosopher grounded in the classical text, or is it a pure construction, deprived of any basis? At the same time, Confucius is qualified as holy (*sanctus*) in the translation. How may we understand the meaning of this denomination, related both to the Chinese interpretative tradition and to Christian dogma?

Continuing our comparison of the Latin translation with the Chinese texts, we then investigated its presentation of certain core Confucian ideas. For example, the cardinal virtue of *Ren* is essentially described from the perspective of its Neo-Confucian universalistic interpretation, suggesting a correspondence with Christian charity. Similarly, the interpretation

of the notion of will, central to the Confucian project of moral transformation, suggests strong similarities with the theme, both Stoic and Christian, of victory over the self. Finally, the conception of political power found in the translation, even if rooted in the imperial order of the Ming dynasty, can also be read according to the political ideals of the Jesuits. In the three areas of morality, transformation of the self and politics, this translation of the *Analects* shows Confucius to be a potent and emblematic figure, who enabled a dialogue between Neo-Confucianism and Classical European thought to take place. This was the first attempt to provide this dialogue with a philosophical foundation, and was made possible by the identification of the Neo-Confucian *li* (or principle of coherence) with the European *ratio*. ■