

THE EARLY MODERN EUROPEAN (NON) RECEPTION OF THE ZHUANGZI TEXT

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Abstract: This essay draws attention to the neglect of a key foundational text of Daoism, namely the Zhuangzi in early modern European discourses about China. It traces the contrasting Jesuit interaction with Confucianism as opposed to Buddhism and Daoism in order to emphasize how a text like the Zhuangzi was unable to be assimilated with the Catholic mission of accommodationism. It contrasts the non reception of the text in early modern Europe with its later popularity following publication of full English translations at the end of the nineteenth century. It argues that the early neglect and later explosive discovery of the Zhuangzi in the West can tell us much about shifts in intellectual history, specifically the misappropriations and misunderstandings of Daoist traditions as filtered through the European mind.

There exists a notable neglect of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 text (a body of work attributed at least in part to the Warring States philosopher Zhuang Zhou 莊周 (ca. 369-286 BCE)¹ in early modern European receptions (roughly 1580-1880) of Chinese thought and philosophy. Of the two native thought systems of China, namely Confucianism and Daoism, it took centuries of European contact and the arrival of Romanticism before serious engagement (with one or two exceptions) with the great Daoist texts: the Laozi 老子 (?) or *Daodejing* 道德經 and particularly, the *Zhuangzi* took place. In the early centuries of Jesuit contact with China, much interest was taken in the *Yijing* 易經 (the *Changes*) that great mystical text of divination, and of course, in the Confucian Four Books (*Lunyu* 論語 “the Analects”, *Mengzi* 孟子 “the Mencius”, *Daxue* 大學 “the Great Learning” and the *Zhongyong* 中庸 “the Doctrine of the Mean”). These texts were seemingly unproblematic for those early Catholic humanists eager to hold a mirror up to Chinese culture and see reflected there their own Judeo-Christian symbolic universe. The foundational Daoist texts, the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* were,

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¹ Scholarly consensus generally agrees that only the so called “Inner Chapters” (*nei pian* 內篇) which are seven in number are homogenous in thought and style and thought to be substantially the work of Zhuangzi himself. The rest of the thirty-three chapter edition that has been passed down to us from the time of Guo Xiang 郭象 (252-312) is separated into the “Outer Chapters” (*wai pian* 外篇) and “Miscellaneous Chapters” (*za pian* 雜篇), chapters 8-22 and 23-33 respectively. The collection of scrolls containing the *Zhuangzi* did not achieve a standard form until the collation efforts of Liu Xiang 劉向 (77-6 BCE) who edited them for the Imperial library of the Han. According to the bibliographical chapter of the *Han Shu* 漢書, the Imperial copy originally had 52 chapters. See Livia Kohn, *Zhuangzi: Text and Context* (Honolulu: Three Pines Press, 2004, pp. 1-10) for a detailed summary on the *Zhuangzi*’s textual history.

however, much more difficult to accommodate to universal Christian truth. As the first Jesuit accounts of the early modern period provided the intellectual foundations for the future field of Sinology, the gap on the *Zhuangzi* as Daoist traditions were sidelined and downgraded by the early missionaries (in line with contemporary Chinese judgement) is highly significant.

What I explore here, then, is the problematic of how European thought missed out on the early discovery and appreciation of Daoist philosophical texts.² I focus on the *Zhuangzi* as the *Laozi* was somewhat taken up as a mystical text in the *philosophia perennis* vein³. It was also translated and commented upon much earlier in Europe and had a number of high-profile champions in the eighteenth century. Today the *Daodejing* is the most translated Chinese work, indeed after the Bible it is thought to be the most translated work in the world.⁴ The other texts sometimes

² I am not unaware of the debate within the academy on the relative merits or pitfalls of separating religious Daoism (*dao jiao* 道教) from the foundational texts of philosophical Daoism (*dao jia* 道家). The French scholar Isabelle Robinet is probably the most stringent representative of the no separation camp writing in her *Taoism: of Growth of a Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997) that any apparent differences are due merely to those between “self-discipline (techniques, training etc.) and ... the speculations that can accompany or crown it.” (3) As I am interested here less in the history of Daoism in China and more in how the *Zhuangzi* was read by Europeans, I use the distinction to avoid having to deal with the immensely complex mass of esoteric texts epitomized by the *Daozang* 道藏 or collected sacred texts of Daoism, canonized in 1444 and still largely untranslated into English. For the sectarian differences in the practice of Daoism brought about by these thousands of texts, see Robinet, *Taoism*, 196-7. On the other side, the Chinese scholar Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 suggests the difference between “Taoism as a philosophy [which] teaches the doctrine of following nature, and Taoism the religion [which] teaches the doctrine of working against nature.” (1948, 3) The semantic problem of mapping “philosophical Daoism” onto the Chinese *dao jia* “family of the Dao” and “religious Daoism” onto *dao jiao* “teachings of the Dao” is itself a form of hermeneutics involving translation and mediation.

³ The term *philosophia perennis* is often associated with the philosopher and sinophile Leibniz who uses the term in an oft-quoted letter to Remond dated August 26, 1714. In his article “Perennial Philosophy: From Agostino, Steuco to Leibniz”, *Journal of the History of the Ideas* 27 (1966), pp. 505-532, Schmitt points out that the first use of the term indeed precedes Leibniz and is used as a title to a treatise by the Italian Augustinian Agostino Steuco (1497-1548). Steuco believed that all religious traditions drew from a universal source and he drew on a well-developed philosophical tradition to create his own synthesis of philosophy, religion and history which he labelled *philosophia perennis*. This syncretic tradition was the intellectual heritage of the first missionaries in China. Although they posited the end of philosophy as piety and the contemplation of God, many of the Jesuits were still open to the truths of the ancient Chinese philosophical tradition as conversant with and in some cases typologies for Christian Revelation. The concept of *philosophia perennis* continued to influence intellectuals well into the twentieth century: C.G Jung and Mircea Eliade and their work on archetypes are two famous examples.

⁴ It is also one of the most misappropriated and misunderstood of the Chinese Classics; harnessed to western spiritual capitalism in the 1960s the marketization of Daoism as self-help has nothing to do with its Classical Chinese context. See Louis Komjathy, *Daoism: A Guide for*

included as part of the Daoist corpus around the central Lao-Zhuang tradition are the syncretic *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (circa 140 BC) and the *Guanzi* 管子 (*Xinshu* 心術, *Baixin* 白心, *Neiye* 內業) and the *Liezi* 列子 from the Jin period 晉 (265-420), written by Lie Yukou 列禦寇. I leave these texts aside to focus on the *Zhuangzi* because it is the *Zhuangzi*, I think, that is most interestingly implicated both in the early missionary reluctance to appreciate the complexity of Daoist philosophical thought and in the (post) modern European “discovery” of Daoism by philosophers and literary critics. It is the case of an absence followed by an explosive discovery. From Ricci’s establishment of a missionary residence in Beijing in 1601 and the proliferation of works engaging with the Confucian Classics, the *Yijing* and latterly the *Laozi* that follow, it will not be until the end of the nineteenth century that a full scholarly translation of the *Zhuangzi* will appear and a serious discussion of the text in Europe can begin.⁵

David Mungello is perhaps the most important living scholar on the Jesuit missions in China and the cultural interaction between China and Europe 1550-1800. Neither his *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (1989) nor the later *The Great Encounter Of China and the West, 1500-1800* (1999) contain an index entry for “Zhuangzi”.⁶ Donald Lach’s immense work of scholarship *Asia in the Making of Europe* which came out in three volumes in seven books between 1965 and 1993 contains information on everything from the flora and fauna of China, to the influence of Oriental art on the *Wunderkammer* of Europe and the price of pepper in the spice trade. Positivistic in nature and a sweepingly encyclopaedic work, there is little in Lach, however, for the scholar interested in how early modern European receptions of ancient Chinese textual traditions, and particularly foundational Daoist Classics like the *Zhuangzi* collided with minds shaped by scholastic theology, Renaissance philosophy and the idea of the Jesuit as “a Roman Catholic profoundly and practically convinced that all things in this world (science and philosophy of course included) are but means for him to work out the salvation of his soul” (Winterton 1887, 254, n.1). The history of orientalism is also, in part, the history of the West’s gradual detachment from Judeo-Christian ideology as the ideology that subsumes all other truths within it. As it was brought into contact with competing and compelling alternative belief systems, Christianity had to reexamine its own tenets. As Lach writes in his epilogue to *Asia in the Making of Europe: The Age of Discovery:*

the Perplexed, 2014. A Professor of Chinese and an ordained Daoist priest, Komjathy successfully shows how “much of what goes by in the name of ‘Daoism’ in the modern world is fabrication, fiction and fantasy” (3).

⁵ The earliest partial translation of the *Zhuangzi* can be found in an eighteenth century translation of the short story “Zhuang Zhou Drums on a Bowl and Attains the Great Dao” by the late Ming writer Feng Menglong. For complete translations we must wait for those of Frederic Balfour, Herbert Giles and James Legge (all into English) in 1881, 1889 and 1891 respectively. Giles’ English translation of 1889 was based on the first German partial edition of *Zhuangzi* by Martin Buber (1910). For Buber’s final edition he then drew in turn on the complete translations of Giles and Legge in 1891.

⁶ Both contain entries for *Laozi*.

“perhaps what is most significant of all is the dawning realization in the West that not all truth and virtue were contained within its own cultural and religious traditions” (Lach 1965, 835). This collision of religious faith with alternative credos was of course not new to these Catholic voyagers in distant lands: as Jesuit scholars steeped in Humanist learning, the accommodation of pagan wisdom to Christian truths had already been subsumed into Jesuit practice. The early story as to how a philosophico-religious foundational Daoist text influenced those currents of intellectual thought in Europe before the end of the nineteenth century remains something of a mystery.

In Europe, the late sixteenth to eighteenth century was a time of huge cultural ferment for missionaries, sinologists and philosophers who were consumed with a fascination for Chinese history, language and culture. It was also a time during which the vast edifice of a hierarchically governed universe, unified and presided over by a God who created the universe out of nothing began to experience the first cracks.⁷ The emergent scientific view of the universe coincided with the age of discovery on the one hand, both of other lands and of an emancipatory “self”⁸, and with a period of wars and retrenchment of religious dogma on the other. Karl Heinz Pohl describes how after the devastation of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), many European intellectuals recommended the moralistically ordered and peaceful Chinese state as “a better model against native barbarism” (2003, 473). They arrived at this view thanks to the missionaries’ accounts of China’s excellent governance which they tied to the influence of the Confucian Classics.⁹

The early Catholic missions in China were admirably broad in their approach to

⁷ In *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), C.S. Lewis describes the medieval synthesis as “the whole organisation of their theology, science, and history into a single, complex, harmonious mental Model of the Universe” (11).

⁸ In 1860, the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt in his seminal *Kultur der Renaissance in Italien (The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy)* wrote that the Renaissance was the age in which “der Mensch wird geistiges Individuum und erkennt sich als solches” (Burckhardt 1860, 76). The emphasis on this dynamic shift from a rigid hierarchical cosmos in which man was sure of his place within it, to an emphasis on the intellectual (*geistig*) value of man as moulder and maker of his own destiny reminds us of the spiritual background against which the Jesuits encountered and interpreted Chinese thought.

⁹ Leibniz is probably the most famous thinker to embrace and respect Chinese philosophy as philosophy. In the Preface to his *Novissima Sinica* of 1697, Leibniz describes how he sees Europe as superior in deductive reasoning, but that China excelled in empirical knowledge. The so-called natural theology of the Chinese was more effective in producing good behavior; China was peaceful whereas Europe was constantly at war. See Lach, *The Preface to Leibniz’ Novissima Sinica, Philosophy East and West* 7:3(1954) pp. 154-55. In his *Discourse on the Natural Philosophy of China*, Leibniz also argued that the Chinese principles of *li* 理 (first principle) and *qi* 氣 (vital energy) could be compared closely with European philosophical concepts and on this basis a common core of philosophical beliefs could be established. Inheriting Leibniz’s enthusiasm, Voltaire became the great champion of Confucianism in the 18th century writing in his *Lettres Philosophiques* that China is already “la nation la plus sage et la mieux policée du monde”.

Sinitic culture and many transplants were scholars, artists, botanists, cartographers and philologists as well as evangelists. The sole conduits for conveying the thought traditions of China to some of the leading minds of Europe of the time, this early period of intellectual openness, cultural dialogue and exchange lasted roughly from the successful installation of Ruggieri and Ricci in southern China in 1583, to Pope Clement XI's issuing of a decree against accommodation in 1704 and its reinforcement by a bull (*Breve ex ille die*) in 1715. This decree was particularly crushing to the Jesuits and their interlocutors back home given that in 1692, the Kangxi Emperor 康熙 had issued his 'Edict of Toleration', allowing the free practice of Christianity in China. The edict was widely known and praised in Europe.¹⁰ This decree was the culmination of the so-called Rites Controversy which developed out of the Jesuit attempt to introduce Christianity to Chinese culture.¹¹

It is reasonably obvious, then, why the Confucian Classics were embraced by early modern missionaries at the expense of alternative textual traditions. First, Confucianism was the cultural code of the elite which had demonstrated a remarkable ability to survive as a political philosophy and a stabilizing force throughout Chinese imperial history. Second, it concerned itself only with external behaviors making no decisive claim on the soul or spirit as understood in a Christian sense. The Jesuits marketed Confucian philosophy for a Christian Catholic Europe. Although study of the Confucian texts was called *ruxue* 儒學 "literati teaching" by the Chinese rather than "Confucianism" because Confucius himself had stated that he was merely transmitting this teaching from the ancient sages rather than originating it,¹² the

¹⁰ That is not to say that the question of accommodation had not been fought out amongst various Catholic factions before this. The Dominicans and Franciscans had always been more hard-line than their Jesuit confreres; they protested the Jesuit approach as apostasy and had retained their European clothing and conviction that the Chinese did not know God. The rites had been banned by Rome as early as 1645, but the Jesuit arguments had eventually won out and the ban was lifted in 1656. We must also mention the dissension within the Jesuits' own ranks: Longobardi and Visdelou were two prominent dissenters from Ricci's version of accommodationism.

¹¹ The question of whether the Confucian rites to honour ancestors and Confucius himself were religious in nature and therefore idolatrous and forbidden to all converted Christians, or purely civil and therefore free from superstition was one of the most significant intellectual debates of the seventeenth century. Linked to this question was the debate over the terminology found in the Classics: *shang di* 上帝 and *tian* 天 and whether these terms could be used for the Christian God. Jacques Gernet points out that "up until Ricci's death in 1610, nobody had dared to question the wisdom of establishing an equivalence between the Sovereign on High of the Chinese Classics and the God of the Christians." (1985, 30) After his death, however, a number of missionaries, chief among them Niccolo Longobardo, came to the conclusion that too many concessions had been made. The Chinese perception of *shang di* was incompatible with the personal, unique and all-powerful Creator of the Judeo-Christian tradition: the natural theology of the Chinese was ultimately considered materialistic. This is of course precisely what would appeal to the deist philosophers of the Enlightenment.

¹² *Lunyu* 7.1: 子曰：述而不作，信而好古（A transmitter, not an originator, I believe in and love the ancients).

Jesuits Latinized the Chinese name Kong-fu-zi into Confucius and, by phonetic extension, the teaching associated with this name became “Confucianism”. Unlike Buddhism and Daoism, this new creation was represented as being rational, free from superstitious religiosity and open to Christian revelation.

Whereas Ruggieri and Ricci had initially donned Buddhist garb and tried to win over the populace, Ricci quickly recognized the importance of the literati, scholar-bureaucrat class (the *ru* 儒) and the status they enjoyed in comparison to the lowly Buddhist monks. He abandoned his alliance with the Buddhists and his later works would chastise Buddhism, especially the Buddhist idea according to which being emerged from nothingness. Thus although in the early days of contact the Jesuits had recognized many similarities between Buddhism and Christianity, such as the recognition of a kind of Trinity, the existence of heaven and hell, the call to poverty, chastity and obedience, these potential areas of assimilation became the fierce battle ground for Chinese souls. In his earliest surviving letter from China, written on 13 September 1534, Ricci wrote that he preferred “the sect of the literati” and that although “commonly they do not believe in the immortality of the soul” they rejected the superstitions of Buddhist and Daoist traditions, and practiced an austere cult of heaven and earth. (Quoted in Standaert 2003, 374) The Buddhists and the Jesuits accused each other of fraudulent imitation and maintained that only their religious teaching contained the truth. While Buddhism was maligned, Daoist texts were ignored altogether. Knut Walf makes the important point that: “European missionaries judged every interpretation of the world as ‘religion’. Furthermore, they used the Western phonotype of (highly) institutionalized religion, which in China corresponded more with Buddhism and Confucianism.” (Walf, 2005, 279) This necessarily resulted in a neglect of the perceived “mystical incomprehensibilities” (Creel 1956, 52) of the various strands of Daoist practices and beliefs. This neglect would go on to perpetuate the misunderstanding of the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* into the twentieth century.

In his path-breaking book *China and the Christian Impact* (First French edition Paris: Gallimard, 1982; English translation: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), Jacques Gernet points to the early seventeenth century as a particularly amenable time for the Jesuits to be propagating the Catholic faith thanks to the amalgamation and accommodation of European and Chinese science, technology, philosophy and ethics. He writes:

There happened at that time to be a happy conjunction between the teaching of the Jesuits and the tendencies of the period. An orthodox reaction, hostile to the Buddhist influences which had deeply penetrated literate circles, had been developing ever since the last years of the seventeenth century. [...] Along with Buddhism itself, the Buddhist-inspired deviations, originating in the school of Wang Yangming (Wang Shouren, 1472-1529) were being condemned. The egoistical quest for wisdom by the men of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was rejected as vain and immoral at the point when, faced with a general decline of society and its institutions, the elite circles were rediscovering the importance of their social responsibilities. (Gernet, 1985, 23)

Though Gernet discusses the lack of appeal of Buddhist practices and belief to the ruling elites, Daoist texts are simply lumped together with Buddhist ones as sources of selfishness and idolatry. Ricci's reply to a letter from a Chinese contemporary urging him not to attack Buddhism before reading the Buddhist texts is indicative of the missionary attitude to anything that was not state Confucianism. Ricci writes: "Since entering China, I have learned only of Yao, Shun, the Duke of Zhou and Confucius and I do not intend to change." (Quoted in Gernet 1985, 214) This willful turning away from other textual traditions was indicative of the way early Jesuits selected their encounters with Chinese classical texts and rejected the syncretic nature of Chinese belief systems. Riding a wave of internal power struggles to undermine Buddhist monks at court and Daoist folk practices amongst the populace, the early missionaries aligned themselves with the *ru* scholars to create a civic-centered theology.

There was, of course, early Chinese opposition to the Jesuits' denunciations of Buddhism and Daoism and their preaching of Christianity. In 1623, a Wang Qiyuan writes:

The barbarians began by attacking Buddhism. Next, they attacked Taoism, next the later Confucianism [*hou ru* 后儒]. If they have not yet attacked Confucius, that is because they wish to remain on good terms with the literate elite and the mandarins, in order to spread their doctrine. But they are simply chafing at the bit in secret, and have not yet declared themselves. (Gernet, 1985, 52)

In truth, the Jesuits were often received by the Chinese elites with an adverse mixture of admiration, disdain, indignation and bemusement. Though the Mission did achieve some noteworthy conversions and won the toleration of both the Wanli and Kangxi emperors, the predominant mood in China remained one of bafflement at the central concept of 天主 *tianzhu* and horror at the crucifixion. Ricci in particular, was very aware of the essential absurdity of his task and believed that his goal "was not to multiply baptisms, but to win for Christianity an accepted place in Chinese life." (Leys 1983, 46) This *suave modo* approach ultimately meant that although the Jesuits had sought to use the prestige of European science to reinforce the authority of the Catholic religion, the Chinese rejected that religion wishing to keep only the scientific knowledge.¹³ In his understanding of how difficult Christian doctrine was to convey to those not already sufficiently primed for it, Ricci had turned to philosophy to sugar

¹³ Works written by missionaries in Classical Chinese were included in the great compilation commissioned by the Qianlong emperor 乾隆 (r. 1735-1795) in 1773. In the 1781 special guide to the collection, the *Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao* 四庫全書總目提要 there was the following note appended to the section dealing with missionary works: "The superiority of the Western teaching (*xixue*) lies in their calculations; their inferiority lies in their veneration of a Master of Heaven of a kind to upset men's minds." Quoted in Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact*, 59.

the pill because, as Feng Youlan puts it: “The Chinese people take even their religion philosophically.” (Feng 1948, 2)¹⁴ That Ricci wasn’t quite persuasive enough is testimony to the strength and sophistication of China’s native ethical philosophy and its skepticism towards the more mystical elements of Christianity (the Virgin Birth, the Incarnation, the Resurrection and the Trinity).

In one letter, Ricci seeks to make Confucius intelligible to those European humanists back home similarly with an appeal to ethics, on how to live, rather than to religious doctrine. He describes the Chinese sage as “*un altro Seneca*” (a second Seneca) intuiting the shared mission despite the difference in form of the philosophical works of Plato, Aristotle and Seneca, and the Chinese Masters. He writes: “At the very time when, if I calculate correctly, Plato and Aristotle flourished among us, there also flourished [amongst the Chinese] certain literati of good life who produced books dealing with moral matters, not in a scientific way, but in the form of maxims”. (Standaert, 2003, 375) The identification of ethics as the heart of philosophy both east and west allowed Ricci to consolidate his accommodationist line. Just as Renaissance authors were aware of the important distinctions between Christianity and Stoicism but ultimately deemed them compatible, so did Ricci merge Stoicism and Confucianism as a way of clearing the intellectual pathways for Christianity. The Jesuits also tried and failed to have Aristotelian philosophy introduced as the basis of the Chinese education system.

The reason for the missionaries not attacking Confucianism was, then, in some senses purely tactical. In a letter of 15 February 1609, Ricci acknowledges this utilitarian aspect of championing the Confucian Classics despite any personal affinities he may or may not have had with Daoist texts. He writes:

In the books that I have written, I begin by singing their praises [i.e. Those of the Confucian men of letters] and by using them to confound the others [the Buddhists and the Taoists], not refuting them directly but interpreting the points on which they are in disagreement with our faith... A most distinguished person who belongs to the sect of idols has even called me an adulator of the literate elite... And I am very keen that others should regard me in that light, for we should have much more to do if we were obliged to fight against all three sects. (Gernet, 1985, 52)

The ambiguity surrounding Ricci and the Jesuits’ intentions, the extent to which their views changed on encounter with Chinese texts and customs, and how the Chinese themselves understood the Jesuit mission is born out in this passage. Here Ricci pictures the Jesuits as engaging in a fight against the *san jiao* 三教 using a divide and conquer mentality. However, in a letter by the infamous “maverick thinker and intellectual provocateur” (Handler-Spitz, 2017, 3) Li Zhi 李贽 (1527-1602), it would seem that the literati had no clue what to make of Ricci’s intentions. In an oft-cited

¹⁴ Feng quotes Derk Bodde who writes: “They [the Chinese] are not a people for whom religious ideas and activities constitute an all-important and absorbing part of life... It is ethics (especially Confucian ethics), and not religion (at least not of a formal, organized type), that provided the spiritual basis in Chinese civilization.” 4.

passage Li Zhi writes:

Now he is perfectly able to speak our language, he can write our characters, he follows the customs and ceremonies in use here, he is an unusually accomplished man... But I still don't know what he has come here for. I have already met him three times, and I still don't know what he is here to do.

今蓋能言我此間之言，作此間之文字，行此間之儀禮，是一極標致人也。。。但不知到此何爲，我已經三度相合，畢竟不知道此何幹也。(Li Zhi, 2016, 256-7)

The enigmatic quality of Ricci in particular as he was perceived by the Chinese reminds us of what a feat it was for the Jesuits to master the language, culture and mores of China sufficiently to become prominent members of society at the highest level. That Ricci was not known as a proselytizer of the Catholic faith is testimony to his roles as an outstanding cultural mediator and a Humanist scholar at home with ambiguity and ambivalence.

In a rather daringly titled chapter “Matteo Ricci, The Daoist”, Haun Saussy gestures towards how Ricci was rather counterintuitively perceived by his Chinese contemporaries as a Daoist sage and that he “found strategic and publicity value in allowing them to do so.” (2017, 51) Saussy troubles the neat distinction between Ricci the Jesuit missionary (and therefore staunch upholder of the Confucian Classics), and Ricci the Ming celebrity who acquired and perhaps himself actually cultivated a persona as a renegade anti-establishment figure. Saussy describes Ricci's "persona" as "the disputatious, paradoxical, countercultural persona of Zhuang Zhou in the *Zhuangzi*"¹⁵ and focusses his analysis not on the intentions of the missionaries and their professions of accommodation, but on how Ricci's Chinese contemporaries perceived him. Saussy's analysis of a letter addressed to Ricci by Li Zhi in which he compares Ricci's arrival in China in terms that consciously echo the huge fish Kun descending in *xiao yao* 逍遙 “free and easy” fashion opens up a window to a kind of multi-perspectivism. Ricci recognizes and enjoys textual references to the *Zhuangzi* and his being written about in other places as a *shan ren* 山人 or Daoist mountain recluse. Therefore, although there exists no direct record detailing how Jesuits understood the *Zhuangzi*, no translations or commentaries, we may discern the seeds of the later twentieth century appreciation of the *Zhuangzi* scattered in the personal letters between Ricci and his Chinese interlocutors.

When we leave the rather exceptional figure of Ricci and return to the Jesuit China mission as a whole, we see that the textual culmination of the Jesuit proposal to create a Confucian-Christian synthesis was the translation (completed by hundreds of Jesuit collaborators) of the first three of the Confucian¹⁶ *Four Books Sishu* 四書 into

¹⁶ This appellation is always somewhat problematic given that what the Jesuits promulgated as the essence of Confucius' teaching was in fact the selections made by the much later Song neo-Confucian Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200). For example, the *Daxue* 大學 and *Zhongyang* 中央 were separate chapters drawn from the traditional classic the *Liji* 禮記 *The Book of Rites*. Zhu Xi,

Latin. This mammoth project was completed in 1687 and edited by Philippe Couplet in Paris. Published under the rather revealing title *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*¹⁷ (*Confucius, the Philosopher of China*), this was the book that successfully launched Confucianism in Europe and represented it as the eastern counterpart to the European Renaissance at the expense of Daoist texts. The Four Books had been used as Chinese language primers for newly arrived missionaries in China, and now they were to be selectively disseminated in Europe as the very spirit and essence of native Chinese thought. Ricci and his collaborators were content to treat the *Great Learning*, the *Doctrine on the Mean* and the *Analects* as serious philosophical texts and exemplary models of enlightened deism: sections of translations were entitled “*Scientiae Sinicae*” (Learning of the Chinese), “*Sapientia Sinica*” (Chinese Wisdom), and “*Sinarum scientia politico-moralis*” (The politico-moral learning of the Chinese). When it comes to the key Daoist texts, however, the *Laozi* receives only a cursory and dismissive mention, and the *Zhuangzi* no mention at all.

In “The Encounter of Christianity and Daoism in Philippe Couplet’s *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*”, Mei Tin Huang searches for references to the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* and tries to find alternatives to the standard Jesuit line that Daoism was “superstition”, “exorcism”, “sorcery” or “heresy”. Huang finds that Couplet does grant Laozi the status of philosopher (which Ricci never did) in his paragraph entitled “*Brevis Notitia Sectae. Li lao kiun Philosophi, ejusque Sectariorum, quos in Sinis Tao Su vocant.*” Laozi is referred to as the philosopher *Li Lao Jun* 李老君 and founder of religious Daoism. In his *Brevis Notitia*, Couplet mentions the search of the first emperor Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇 (259 BC-210 BC, r. 221 BC-210 BC) for longevity and his resorting to the *artis magicae*, the esoteric arts or alchemists. Couplet follows the standard Jesuit interpretation that the philosophical teachings of Laozi (*daojia* 道家) were quickly corrupted and intermingled with the religious practices of magic, alchemy and idolatry that characterised the religious practise of *daojiao* 道教. The emphasis on immortality, the development of *changsheng yao* 長生藥 (life extending drugs) was, of course, a heresy to Catholics who believed in the death of the body and the eternal resurrection of the soul. However, as Huang points out, Couplet did make an effort to distinguish the philosopher Laozi from the “sect” that had grown up around his teachings. Fascinatingly, he cites the legend from the *Shiji Zhengyi* 史記正

following up on an earlier trend among his Song predecessors, chose these passages because they provided a brief, compact formulation of the basics of all learning, capable of serving as a guide to one’s reading of the other classics. Indeed, Zhu Xi’s concise selection was so succinct and focused that it readily became the heart of a Neo-Confucian education. First adopted on the local level in Song private academies, next in the curriculum of the Imperial College, then in the civil-service examination system, ultimately it reached beyond the borders of China into the schools of Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. See De Bary, “Thomas Merton and Confucianism: Why the Contemplative Never Got the Religion Quite Right.” *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion & Public Life*, 2011.

¹⁷ *Confucius sinarum philosophus, sive scientia sinensis : latine exposita ...; adjecta est tabula chronologica sinicae monarchiae...* (Parisiis : apud Danielem Horthemels... 1687)

義 via the Daoist scholar Ge Hong 葛洪's (283–343) *Shenxian Zhuan* 神仙傳 (Biographies of Divine Immortals) that Laozi was carried for 81 years in his mother's womb and then burst from her left side. This mythical aetiology (one thinks of Athena, emerging from Zeus's forehead in the Greek tradition) is somewhat unusual for a Jesuit to associate with a philosopher figure who he understands to be a historical personage. Couplet does not, however, ridicule the legend nor cast doubt on the historicity of Li Lao Jun. Though Couplet attributes to Laozi an intuitive understanding of divinity, he still views this understanding as too material and incompatible with the Christian God. Couplet's commentary on Chapter 42 of the *Daodejing* ("The Tào produced One; One produced Two; Two produced Three; Three produced All things." 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物) reads as following:

This, the pronouncement of a man, is quite ambiguous and obscure, as the maxims of the Ancients usually are. Yet one thing is certain: he was aware of a kind of first and supreme deity. However, his understanding was flawed in as much he conceived of the deity as corporeal [*numen esse corporeum*] though ruling over all other deities, like a king rules over his vassals. It is widely believed that he was the founder and creator of the art of alchemy. (Couplet, 1687, XXIV)

Laozi as a figure is granted the status of a philosopher but only as the founder of a Daoist system of alchemy; the *textual* foundation on which Daoism was formed, namely the *Daodejing* and the later *Zhuangzi* and their established commentarial traditions are either written off as obscure or simply not mentioned at all.

The compilers of the *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* would have a lasting influence on how philosophical Daoism would be received (i.e. constructed) in Europe. The great sinologist and (not inconsequentially) Protestant missionary James Legge writes at the end of the nineteenth century: "The brilliant pages of Kwang-tze [Zhuangzi] contain little more than his ingenious defense of his master's [Laozi's] speculations, and an aggregate of illustrative narratives...in themselves for the most part unbelievable, often grotesque and absurd" (Legge, 1962a [1891], 39). Legge's Protestant paradigm of a pure master text, namely the *Daodejing* opposed to the later "popish" contamination with ritualistic and magical practices left little room for a deep and meaningful appreciation of the *Zhuangzi* as a composite philosophical text.

Western philosophers up until the twentieth century continued to dismiss Daoism as the very infancy of philosophy, a nihilistic reductive credo in which the goal of perpetual tranquility and the erasure of all distinctions was seen as anathema to western philosophical systems built upon logical rigor. In Hegel's *Lectures on The History of Philosophy*, delivered in 1825-6 he famously described the Chinese master texts as uninteresting manifestations of an early stage in the evolution of Spirit or *Geist*. If each civilization represents a stage of development which for Hegel culminates in nineteenth century Germany, China is characterised by *Stillstand*— a marmoreal, static civilization ruled by a despotic emperor over a people characterized by passivity and conformity. For the Jesuits, while Daoism was deemed an obstacle to their accomodationist mission, Confucius at least was revered as a moral philosopher. For Hegel the *whole* of masters' literature in early China is understood as lacking the

speculative thinking and systematicity he deemed essential to “philosophy”. He describes Confucius as “merely a practical statesman” whose reflections “never rise above the conventional views”. Though Hegel finds the *Yijing* intriguing, he still deems it overly concerned with the external ordering rather than the inner nature of reality. He discusses Laozi and the *Daodejing* but finds the Dao too obscure for any substantial commentary and he makes no reference to the *Zhuangzi* at all. Ignored by the Jesuits and the Enlightenment *philosophes*, it will not be until the early twentieth century that the efforts of Richard Wilhelm and Martin Buber will create a Dao fever (*Dao-fiebers*) in Germany, Giles’ *Zhuangzi* and Legge’s *The Texts of Taoism* will do the same in England, and in 1823 in France Abel Rémusat, the first European chair of Chinese language and literature at the Collège de France will publish *Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-Tseu*, one of the earliest European works on Lao-tzu and classical Daoism.¹⁸

The *Zhuangzi* has now been rehabilitated as a linguistically playful philosophical text that offers complex perspectives on alternative ways to live. It is also an extraordinary literary text; Victor Mair describes it as “primarily a work of literature than a work of philosophy”. Herbert Giles’ English translation was rapturously received by Oscar Wilde who penned a review of it in *The Speaker* in 1890 under the title “A Chinese Sage”. Deeply appreciative of Zhuangzi’s contrarian spirit, Wilde praised the rejection of instrumental morality and “the idealist’s contempt for utilitarian systems”. Cribbing from the Oxford theologian Aubrey Moore’s introduction to Giles’ translation, Wilde writes: “Chuang Tsū may be said to have summed up in himself almost every mood of European metaphysical or mystical thought, from Herakleitus down to Hegel.”¹⁹ In this he publicizes a new appreciation of East-West understanding in Europe. Though Wilde was no sinologist and he uses Daoist ideas impressionistically and to suit his own purposes, it is hard not to appreciate the kindred spiritual ethos that Wilde captures in his reading of Giles’ *Zhuangzi*. Speaking very much of his own day, Wilde goes on:

But Chuang Tsū was something more than a metaphysician and an illuminist. He sought to destroy society, as we know it, as the middle classes know it. . . . There is nothing of the sentimentalist in him. He pities the rich more than the poor, if he ever pities at all, and prosperity seems to him as tragic a thing as suffering. He has

¹⁸ The great period of nineteenth-century Sinology did little of course to change the age-old distinction between “authentic” philosophical ie. textual Daoism and “polluted” ie. practised religious Daoism. Legge epitomized this outdated (although still present in the academic study and of world religions) approach to Daoism. According to Girardot (1999, 108), Legge was “the single most important figure contributing to the late Victorian invention of ‘Taoism’, as a reified entity located ‘classically’, ‘essentially’, ‘purely’ and ‘philosophically’ within certain ancient texts or ‘sacred books’.” The use of quotation marks here reminds us how suspect these appellations became post Said’s critique of Orientalism as a negative, distorting paradigm..

¹⁹ Review “*Chuang Tsū*, translated from the Chinese by Herbert A. Giles,” *The Speaker* 1:6 (8 February 1890), 144-146, reprinted in Richard Ellman, ed. *The Artist As Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde* (University of Chicago Press, 1982) as “A Chinese Sage (Confucius),” 221-228.

nothing of the modern sympathy with failures, nor does he propose that the prizes should always be given on moral grounds to those who come in last in the race. It is the race itself that he objects to; and as for active sympathy, which has become the profession of so many worthy people in our own day, he thinks that trying to make others good is as silly an occupation as ‘beating a drum in a forest in order to find a fugitive.’ . . . While as for a thoroughly sympathetic man, he is, in the eyes of Chuang Tsū, simply a man who is always trying to be someone else, and so misses the only possible excuse for his own existence.

If the *Zhuangzi*'s joyful abstention from the will to rule and serve had been what set it apart from the *Laozi* and from what Wiebke Denecke calls “the Huanglao version of a cosmic administration of the universe through the ‘law’ of the Way” (2010: 233), now that abstention was celebrated as a source of radical freedom from bourgeois society. If the text's incongruity with ordered hierarchical government had sealed its fate in oblivion for so long, by the late nineteenth-century *Zhuangzi* was poised to become the Chinese philosopher of choice for an atheistic and world-weary Europe seeking a break with conformism.

Connections now being made between *Zhuangzi* and Heidegger, *Zhuangzi* and Derrida, *Zhuangzi* and Spinoza, *Zhuangzi* and the philosophy of language etc reflect the text's celebration of the unstable nature of the self and the world: the function of life becomes an exhilarating process of spontaneous self-creation. It also insists repeatedly that death and life are just the same and that neither should be sought or feared.²⁰ Profoundly anti-dogma, anti-government and anti-otherworld at the expense of this one it is clear why the Jesuits did not quite know what to do with *Zhuangzi*'s chutzpah. That the text was ignored for so long is a reminder of the extent to which the early European reception of Chinese texts were entirely reliant upon the missionary accounts filtered through a Catholic agenda. The missionaries decided what got read and how because they were the only Europeans equipped with the skills to read and interpret Classical Chinese texts. The *Zhuangzi*, however, has always floated free of the traditions that have surrounded it. Neither a prescriptive text nor a coherent system of belief, the *Zhuangzi* still might be deemed a quasi-religious text that offers a different (and for its European readers, competing) vision of revelation. In this sense, it has been thoroughly rediscovered by modernity. The story of that modernity as a gradual detachment from monotheism and from a faith in overarching, hierarchical structures is reflected in the neglect and subsequent feverish interest in the *Zhuangzi* in the West.

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²⁰ It is, of course, paradoxical that the *Zhuangzi* would be linked with immortality cults and the concept of *yang sheng* 養生 when the text rejects both the possibility and desirability of immortality.

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