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Article

Is Confucius a Philosopher or a Saint? Michele Ruggieri's Views from his Translations of the *Four Books*

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Abstract: Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607) was the first Westerner officially approved to reside in China. He promoted Chinese and Western cultural exchange, and he was especially noted for facilitating dialogue between Confucianism and Catholicism. His writings had an important impact in both China and Europe. During his sojourn preaching in China, Ruggieri not only wrote the *Tianzhu shilu*-- the first catechism written in Chinese--but he was also the first Westerner to translate the *Four Books* into western language and introduce them to Europe. Based on Ruggieri's two translations of the *Four Books*--one translation into Spanish, and one into Latin--this article analyses Ruggieri's views of Confucius. In his translations, Ruggieri identified Confucius as a philosopher and a *shengren*, or saint, and he highlighted the status of Confucius in the *Four Books*. After the analysis of the Confucian concepts, this article discusses Ruggieri's translations implied that despite showing the rational aspects of Confucianism, the religiousness was still in Confucianism. After Ruggieri, other Jesuits who came to China gradually turned to emphasize the rational aspects of Confucianism.

Keywords: Michele Ruggieri; views of Confucius; the *Four Books*; Chinese Philosophy

1. Introduction

Appropriately evaluating Confucius was one of the most important issues for missionaries who wanted to understand Confucianism. This issue was related to the following questions: could Confucianism be considered a philosophy, and was Confucianism compatible with Catholicism? In the Ming and Qing dynasties, missionaries argued about the identity of Confucius. This was one of the core arguments during the Rites Controversy. Debates about whether Chinese thought might be considered a philosophy were also common among missionaries. These debates dated to the earliest translations of the *Four Books* 四書 by Michele Ruggieri.

In the 16th century, Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) introduced Western learning to the East. Facilitated by the Jesuit strategies of "cultural accommodation" and "preaching by science," Catholicism, together with philosophy and science, was introduced into China. Beginning with the translation work of the missionaries, hundreds of Western works were translated into Chinese. Reciprocally, Chinese classics were translated into Western languages. One of these classical works was the collection known as the *Four Books*, which particularly draws our attention.

Cheng Hao (程顥) (1032-1085) and Cheng Yi (程頤) (1033-1107) separated the *Daxue* 大學 and *Zhongyong* 中庸 chapters from the *Liji* 禮記 and established them as independent texts, and Zhu Xi (朱熹) (1130-1200) grouped those two texts along with the *Lunyu* 論語 and *Mencius* into the compilation known as the *Four Books*. Since the Song era, these four texts have played an especially important role in the history of Chinese thought. After the Yuan Emperor Renzong (元仁宗) (r. 1311-1320) re-established the Imperial Competitive Examination in 1315, the *Four Books* were included in the content of the examination system and became foundational in public discourse in China.

The Jesuits early on began translating the *Four Books* into Western languages, for they saw that effort as a gateway to understanding Chinese culture. Their translations demonstrated their interpretations of Chinese culture, especially of Confucianism, to other Europeans. Investigating the missionaries' translations of the *Four Books* and of other classics allows us to explore the missionaries'

intellectual environment and to examine intellectual issues current in the Late Ming. Examining translations of these classical texts allows us to investigate cross-cultural understandings of Chinese and Western culture in the Late Ming and to explore the dialogue between missionaries and Chinese intellectuals during that era.

Michele Ruggieri, to the best of our knowledge, was the first Westerner to translate the *Four Books* into a European language. The perspectives on Confucius that he expresses in his translations are noteworthy because they directly reveal how he identifies Confucius and how he views the ritual to Confucius. This latter issue becomes a point of contention in the Chinese Rites Controversy. In order to approach this topic, it is necessary to investigate Ruggieri's translations of the *Four Books*.

Recently, much effort has been put into studying Ruggieri's translations and studies of the *Four Books*. Previously, scholars have focused on one particular manuscript by Ruggieri, or they have investigated the background of a particular manuscript, or they have focused on translations of a certain concept.¹ This article, which is written from the perspective of Chinese philosophy, differs from previous research in that it focuses on depictions of Confucius in Ruggieri's two translations of the *Four Books*. It commences with some preliminary analysis about Ruggieri's identification of Confucius as a philosopher and a saint. It argues that Ruggieri emphasized the rational aspects of Confucianism and implied the religiousness in Confucianism, and that his translations and interpretations of the Confucian classics might have influenced other Jesuits. Furthermore, exploring these questions allows us to reflect on the issue of whether Confucianism is a "philosophy".

2. Ruggieri's Spanish and Latin Translations of the *Four Books*

So far as is known to us, Ruggieri produced two sets of manuscript studies of the *Four Books*: one was produced in Spanish, and a second was produced in Latin. The Spanish manuscript contains three parts, as follows: (1) *The Teaching of Men, the First of What is Generally Called the Four Books* (*Disciplina de los varones, libro primero de los que comunmente se dizen en la China los quatro libros*); (2) *Book Two, Titled Zhongyong, Meaning to be Always in the Middle* (*Libro Segundo, Intitulado Chum, Yum, Que Quiere Dezir, Estar Semper En El Medio*); and (3) *Chinese Book Titled Lunyu, that is, Necessity of Paying Attention to Words* (*Libro De La China Intitulado Lun Yun, Que Quiere Decir: Que Se Deven Considerer Las Palabras*).

The Spanish manuscript was completed around 1590, when Ruggieri returned to Europe. At that time, the most powerful ruler of the European continent, Felipe II (1527-1598), took the initiative to meet Ruggieri. Ruggieri gave his translation of the *Four Books* to the Spanish King. The original manuscript was first housed in the Alcazar of Madrid and was eventually moved to the Royal Monastery Library of San Lorenzo in El Escorial (Real Biblioteca De San Lorenzo del Monasterio del Escorial) in 1601-1602.²

Ruggieri also translated the *Four Books* into Latin. The Latin manuscript is kept in the V. Emanuele II Roman National Library in Italy.³ It consists of several parts. The first part of the manuscript is titled "First Book—Human Institution" (*Liber Primus Humana Institutio*). The two Chinese characters *da xue* (大學) appear on the left corner of the first page together with the Chinese pronunciation "Tà Shio." This part of the manuscript includes pages 1 to 14; page 14 is left blank. The second part is titled "Second Book—Always in the Middle" (*Secundus Liber Semper in Medio*). On the first page of this part, the two Chinese characters *zhong* and *yong* (中庸) appear on the left with the Chinese pronunciation "ciù yum." This part includes pages 15 to 42; page 42 is left blank. The third part is titled "That is that Book about Consideration in the Rank of the Third" (*Id Est De Consideratione Sit Liber Ord[in]e Tertius*). Chinese characters *Lunyu* (論語) appear on the left, together with the Chinese pronunciation "luin iu"; this part ranges from pages 43 to 135, with pages 126-135 left blank.

¹ See Luo (2015), Wang (2016), Meynard and Villasante (2018), Meynard and Wang (2018), Li (2018), Wang (2019), Wang (2020), Wang (2021), Ferrero (2024).

² This manuscript's number is c. III27.

³ This manuscript is numbered Fondo Gesuitico [3314]1185 and it contains 344 pages, in five parts.

The fourth part is “Diverse Opinions out of Diverse Collecting Pieces, Translating from Chinese Language to Latin” (*Diversorum Autorum Sententiae ex diversis codicibus collectae, è Sinensi lingua in Latina translatae*), but there are neither Chinese characters nor pronunciation. This section is comprised of pages 1 to 34, with pages 32 to 34 left blank. The last part is titled “Book Mencius, nominally from those which are Generally called the Four Books” (*Liber Mencius nomine ex iis qui vulgo quattuor libri vocantur*), and there are no Chinese characters or pronunciation; this part is comprised of pages 1 to 174, with pages 152-174 left blank.⁴

Although the signature at the end of this manuscript is that of Michele Ruggieri, there are debates about the authorship of this translation. The first who questioned the authorship was Pasquale D’Elia (1890-1963), an Italian researcher who considered Ricci the original author of the translations. His inference was based on Ruggieri’s bad Chinese (D’Arelli 1998, 163-4), a notion that may be traced back to an incorrect judgment by Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606). However, in his later work, D’Elia promoted the idea that Ruggieri was the real author (D’Elia, 1942-1949, p.43, n. 2). Francesco D’Arelli also considered Matteo Ricci to be the first translator of these books, and he believed that Ruggieri had, at most, copied these translations. However, the rediscovery of the Spanish manuscript easily proves that D’Alia was mistaken. According to the recent research (Wang 2016), the authorship of this Latin manuscript has been proved to be Ruggieri. The rediscovery of the *Four Books’* Spanish translation further confirms that Ruggieri, instead of Matteo Ricci, was the first Jesuit who translated Confucian classics into a European language (Meynard and Wang 2018).

When comparing the Spanish and Latin manuscripts, it becomes clear that the translation style and the interpretations of the core concepts are extremely similar. Moreover, the Spanish manuscript may facilitate the understanding of the Latin translation: the Spanish manuscript is written clearly and beautifully, but the Latin one is full of abbreviations and omissions. Using these two translations together makes it easier for us to read them and to understand how Ruggieri translated the Confucian Classics.

3. Is Confucius a Philosopher?

Considering the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, it is likely that Ruggieri dealt with multiple problems during his translation process. One question was how one might understand the figure of Confucius. This question is related to broader debates about how one might understand the larger Chinese conceptual world: questions about whether Chinese thought is “philosophical”, for example, are still discussed today. Based on his understanding of Chinese culture, Ruggieri identified Confucius as a philosopher, and this demonstrated to the Western world that Chinese culture was a civilized, rational, and orderly society: it was a culture where the Catholic faith could be promulgated. Thus, there was no need to preach Catholicism by force, as had been done in South America.

It is worth noting that in Ruggieri’s opinion, Confucius, similar to Plato and Aristotle, was a philosopher. In his Spanish manuscript study and translation of the *Zhongyong*, Ruggieri called Confucius a “philosopher” (*filósofo*) three times⁵; this was undoubtedly the first time Confucius was called a philosopher. Every time Ruggieri uses “philosopher” to call Confucius in his manuscript,

⁴ For ease of reference, the five parts correspond to the five volumes in turn.

⁵ When translating the 16th chapter of the *Zhongyong*, Ruggieri added in comments that “The philosopher attributes to the spirits the deeds of God and angels” (*Este filósofo atribuye a los spiritus las obras de Dios y de los ángeles*), see Meynard and Villasante 2018, p.109. Another example can be seen in the 26th chapter of the *Zhongyong*. In his translations, Ruggieri translated “蓋曰天之所以為天也” as “thus, the philosopher says that it is specific to heaven to be heaven” (*y, por eso, dize el filósofo que es propio del cielo ser cielo*), *ibid*, p.123. Then, he translated “蓋曰文王之所以為文也, 純亦不已” as “por lo qual dize el filósofo que es propio de Venguano ser Venguano, cuya perpetuydad no tiene interrupción” (*Thus, the philosopher says that the specific of Wen Wang is to be Wen Wang, who is long-standing, without interruption*), *ibid*.

this is closely related to the religious issues. Ruggieri implies that Confucius was a rational thinker who could understand the existence of supernatural realities like God (*tian*) and spirits or angels (*guishen*) by reason. For him, the Confucian teaching includes the presence of religion, not as a revealed, but as a natural religion (Meynard and Wang 2018).

Ruggieri also emphasizes the relationship between Confucius and Mencius. The *Mencius* is filled with dialogues between Mencius and other people. As a result, Ruggieri believed that he must also explain and establish Mencius' identity. In his translation of the *Mencius*, Ruggieri firstly identifies Mencius as a philosopher (*philosophus*) (Ruggieri. ca.1591-1592, vol. 5, p.1), and this was the first time Mencius was identified as a philosopher by a European. Furthermore, Ruggieri uses the expression "wise man" (*sapiens*) (Ruggieri. ca.1591-1592, vol. 5, p.1) to refer to Mencius. Ruggieri used the term "sapiens" to translate *xianzhe* (賢者) in his study of *Mencius*.⁶ Through this, Ruggieri not only affirms the importance of Mencius but also enhances the status of Confucius. In the *Mencius*, Confucius is a sage whom Mencius respected and imitated. Identifying Mencius as a philosopher could further confirm Confucius's status as a philosopher. Moreover, affirming Mencius' identity as a philosopher is tantamount to affirming the status of Chinese philosophy. Mencius' thinking moreover had far-reaching influence on later Neo-Confucianism. Zhu Xi cited concepts from the *Mencius* to annotate the *Four Books* and to build his own philosophical system. Clearly, Ruggieri understands Zhu Xi's commentarial endeavours and mentions them in corresponding notes about "the commentator" (*el comentador*) (Meynard and Villasante 2018, p.104, p.112) in his Spanish manuscript.

It is worth noting that Ruggieri also used *xianzhe* (賢者) to refer to St. Augustine (354-430) in *Tianzhu shilu* (天主實錄) (Ruggieri, 2002, vol.1, p.14). In comparison, Ruggieri used "the most divine and wise man" (*sanctissimus et sapientissimus vir*) to call St. Augustine in his report to Pope Gregory XIII (1572-1585) (Ruggieri ca. 1580-1584, vol.2, p.11v). It can be seen that Ruggieri used *xianzhe* to strengthen Augustine as a philosopher⁷ and he didn't intend to introduce Catholic Church and Saints into China.

By identifying Confucius and Mencius as philosophers, Ruggieri strengthens the rational aspects of Confucianism. For instance, Ruggieri translates *gewu* (格物) as to "know the reason of things" (*conocer las razones de las cosas*) (Meynard and Villasante 2018, p.84), and he explains that *li* (理) was "essence or nature" (*esencias o naturalezas*) (Meynard and Villasante 2018, p.84), which is different from the *li* in *gewu qiongli* (格物窮理), because in Neo-Confucianism, the term *li* encompasses the meanings of objective knowledge and ethical wisdom. *Zhizhi* (致知) is translated as "the perfection of knowledge" (*la perfección de la ciencia*) (Meynard and Villasante 2018, p.84), once more affirming that Confucianism also values the rational side of knowledge.

Although Ruggieri tried to stress the rational aspects of Confucianism, he still inadvertently brought Catholic ideas into his work. This is reflected in his translation of *ren* (仁). After seeing Confucius as a philosopher, how did Ruggieri interpret Confucius' main ideas? As is well known, *ren* has a very important position in Confucian thought. Investigating Ruggieri's translation of this important concept helps us nuance his understanding of Confucianism. In general, Ruggieri translates *ren* as *pietas* and *caritas*. For example, he translates the Chinese phrase "*xiudao yi ren. Ren zhe, ren ye, qinqin wei da*" (修道以仁。仁者，人也，親親為大) as follows: "If you proceed on the road of virtue, you have accomplished the virtues of love and love to the greatest extent. The love connected with love begins from the nature of man" (*Si per iter virtutis incedit; iter autem virtutis caritatem, maxime pietatem absoluit. Caritas cum pietate coniuncta homini insita est à natura*) (Ruggieri. ca.1591-1592, vol. 2, p.25). *Ren* in the sentence "*xiudao zhi ren*" (修道之仁) is translated as *caritas* and *pietas*; *ren* in the context "*renzhe, renye*" (仁者，人也) is translated as *pietas*, and here Ruggieri also

⁶ For example, Ruggieri translated "Are such things enjoyed even by a good and wise man?" (賢者亦樂此乎), see Lau trans. 2004, p.4, as "Vir Sapiens gaudet ne his rebus" (Is the wise man glad with these things), see Ruggieri. ca.1591-1592, vol.5, p.1.

⁷ Michele Ferrero points out that both Ruggieri and the first Jesuits in China hoped to be able to use Confucius as Saint Augustine and the medieval theologians had used Aristotle or Plato, see Ferrero (2024).

uses *caritas* to translate “*qinqin*” (親親). Michele Ruggieri uses *pietas* very clearly to refer to the reason why *ren* is human nature, while *caritas* mainly expresses family affection. Then, *ren* in “*qinqin*” is explained as *caritas* and *pietas*, and *caritas* supplements *pietas*. For another example, *ren* in “benevolence, wisdom, courage” (*ren, zhi, yong*, 仁、智、勇) is translated into *pietas* (Ruggieri. ca.1591-1592, vol. 2, p.27). These two Latin words together explain the concept of *ren*. Later, the term *agape* is used to explain “neighbour for the love” in Catholicism, which enriches the meaning of *ren* with the love of God.

Using *pietas* to translate *ren* is an original creation of Ruggieri (Wang 2016), but the concept of *pietas* itself, which has many meanings in its Western contexts, is worth considering. One modern dictionary meaning of *pietas* is “sense of duty (to gods, family, country), piety, filial affection, love and patriotism” (Collins 2013, p.162). But the meaning of *pietas* is extremely complicated and has changed across time. In ancient Rome, *pietas* meant loyalty, especially loyalty to the monarch and parents; in the Renaissance, it extended to interpersonal relationships, and it carried multiple meanings of loyalty, salvation, kindness, friendliness, and even “the emotion from Virgin Mary to her holy son Jesus.” *Pietas* is also the source of the English word “pity”, and it contains the meanings of sympathy and compassion. In Ruggieri’s usage, the virtue *pietas* is more abundant and more connotative than *sapientia* (wise), *fortitudo* (courage), *caritas* (charity), *amor* (love), and even *agape*. Ruggieri chose *pietas* to translate *ren* probably because he considered *ren* as a virtue (*tiandao renlun*, 天道人倫). In Confucian tradition, wise and brave people are not necessarily benevolent, but the benevolent must present wisdom, as we see in the chapter *Xianwen* (憲問) in the *Lunyu*, or *Analects*.⁸ *Ren* has unquestionable priority and justification throughout the entire ethical system of Confucianism. Many Confucian concepts, such as the “Three Virtues” (*sandade*, 三達德), “Four Beginnings” (*siduan*, 四端), “five types of human relations” (*wulun*, 五倫), and “nine classics” (*jiujing*, 九經) are all based on *ren*; they enrich the inner resources of *ren* at different levels. Indeed, *pietas* does cover the meanings of *sapientia*, *fortitude*, and *caritas* to some extent, and it does express the meaning of *ren* in the sense of supreme virtue (*zhide*, 至德). Therefore, it seems that Ruggieri’s interpretations of Confucian core concepts were in-depth and proper, and his overall understanding of the meaning and concepts of the Confucian ethical system was comprehensive.⁹

However, it seems that Ruggieri did not abnegate interpreting *ren* through a Catholic lens. For example, in some chapters of his translation and study of the *Lunyu*, he translated “to respect parents and elders is the root of humanity” (Lau trans. 2004, p.3) (*xiaoti ye zhe, qi wei ren zhi ben yu*, 孝悌也者，其為仁之本與) into “this is why obedience to parents and submission to elders are the root and principle to reach the love for others” (*por que la obediencia de los padres y la sujeción a los mayores es la raíz y principio para alcanzar el amor del prójimo*) (Meynard and Villasante 2018, p.113). Obviously, “amor del prójimo” refers to “neighbour for the love” in Catholic thought, and it also is a philosophical extension of the five Confucian relationships.

Thus, it can be seen that in his translations, Ruggieri strengthens the rational side of Confucianism on the one hand, and on the other, he interprets the Confucian core concept *ren* in light of Catholicism. The similar way of interpretation can be seen not only in his identification of Confucius as a philosopher, but also as *shengren*.

4. Is Confucius a Saint?

Saints, in Christian tradition, are considered people who have exceptional holiness due to the glory of God. According to Lawrence Cunningham, there are four general categories of saints: godly people; the blessed ones who are in heaven; people publicly recognized for their holiness by the

⁸ “A good man is always brave; a brave man is not always good” (*renzhe biyou yong, yongzhe bubi you ren*, 仁者必有勇，勇者不必有仁). See Nyman ed. 2014, p.34.

⁹ However, Ruggieri did not accurately translate Confucius’ original text. For example, in his translation of the *Lunyu* he used “idolatry”, a concept specific to the Christian world, was unknown to Confucius, as Buddhism did not enter China until at least 500 years after his lifetime. See Qi 2024.

process of canonization in the Catholic Church; and the justified, as proposed in the scriptures of the New Testament (Cunningham 1980, p.62). All the faithful deceased in heaven, in the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Oriental Orthodox, and Lutheran doctrines are regarded as saints, but some are worthy of great honour or emulation (Woodward 1996, p.16). As Richard Gribble noted, Catholicism's 2,000-year history has seen the process for the proclamation of saints develop significantly. In the early years, Christians regarded all the baptized as saints, but dying for the faith was particularly noteworthy and was awarded with special veneration. The medieval period of Church history saw a significant centralization of canonization. Two favoured categories were the learned cleric, on the one hand, and those servants of God who combined radical poverty, chastity, and obedience, on the other. Until Pope Urban VIII (1623-1644), the papacy had complete control over the declaration of saints (Gribble 2020).

Based on the analysis above, would Ruggieri cause ambiguity and arguments when choosing the term "saint," a concept full of religious meanings, to describe Confucius to Westerners? Before answering this question, it is important to keep in mind that Confucius usually appears as a sage (*shengren*) in the *Four Books*, especially in the *Mencius*. *Shengren* is a very important concept in the history of Chinese thinking. According to research by Wu Zhen, in ancient times, *sheng* originally referred to those who had intellectual virtues. In the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, however, the term had a dual meaning: it implied both perfect moral personality and outstanding political position. As Wu Zhen noted, since Warring States times when Confucius was made a sage, a trend toward sacralising sages developed. In the Song and Ming dynasties, under the widespread influence of the ideological slogan "learning can help one become a sage," the learning and the *Dao* of sages became symbols for Confucian culture, and Confucianism focused on learning to become a sage (Wu 2013).

The notion of *shengren* changed subtly throughout the history of Chinese thought. The translation of *shengren* is an issue worthy of discussion, and it is related to the problem of whether performing rituals to Confucius is incompatible with Catholic faith. How did Ruggieri translate this changing concept? Here are some examples. In his manuscripts, Ruggieri translated *shengren* as "the saint" (*el sancto*) (Meynard and Villasante 2018, pp.126-7) or "the saint and the wise" (*el sabio y sancto*) (Meynard and Villasante 2018, p.105, p.109). Ruggieri mentioned once that someone who has reached such perfection "holds a quasi-divine power" (*tiene un poder casi divino*) (Meynard and Villasante 2018, p.101) or is a "divine man" (*divino hombre*) (Meynard and Villasante 2018, p.118). However, the image of Confucius in Ruggieri's manuscript seems somehow ambiguous. Ruggieri sometimes describes Confucius as a *shengren* based on the term's philosophical meaning, but in other instances he does so from a religious perspective. Consider an example from his Latin translation of the *Lunyu*, when Zigong responded to a question about whether Confucius was a *shengren*. Ruggieri translated Zigong's reply as "the divine has allowed by a special privilege that Confucius becomes saint" (*Numen particulari privilegio permittit vir sit sanctus*) (Ruggieri ca.1591-1592, vol. 3, p.80). Moreover, in Ruggieri's translation of the 21st chapter of the *Zhongyong*, it is clear that *shengren* gain their ability from "the light from the heaven and divine" (*caelesti divinoque lumine*) (Ruggieri ca.1591-1592, vol. 2, p.27), which implies that ultimate power is derived from God. In his Spanish translation of the *Zhongyong*, Ruggieri used the word "*arriba*" to express where *shengren* gain their abilities. The reason why Ruggieri uses two different words, in my point of view, is to appeal to the two manuscripts' different readerships: in the Spanish manuscript, a gift to the Spanish King, Ruggieri chose a more neutral word, while in the Latin manuscript, targeting the Pope and other European readers, he does not need to avoid the religious aspect of Confucianism.

Ruggieri's identification of Confucius as a saint can be seen in his Latin manuscript study of the *Mencius* as well. To a certain extent, the sanctification of the sage is done by Mencius himself. In the history of Confucianism, Mencius plays an important role in identifying Confucius as a sage. *Mencius* 2A discusses whether Confucius is a sage: "Tzu-kung said, 'Not to tire of learning is wisdom; not to weary of teaching is benevolence. You must be a sage to be both wise and benevolent.' A sage is something even Confucius did not claim to be. What an extraordinary thing for you to say that of me" (Lau trans. 2004, p.34) (*Zigong yue: 'xue bu yan, zhi ye; jiao bu juan, ren ye. Ren qie zhi, fuji ji sheng*

yi' fu sheng, Kongzi buju, shi he yan ye, 子貢曰：‘學不厭，智也；教不倦，仁也。仁且智，夫子既聖矣’ 夫聖，孔子不居，是何言也). When translating these sentences, Ruggieri chose “sanctus vir”.¹⁰ Namely, Confucius is a saint, wise man and perfect man (perfectus vir)¹¹. Sometimes, Ruggieri just used “saint” (*sancto*) to refer to Confucius: “Confucius truly was a saint of all time” (*Confucius vero erat sanctus omnium temporum*) (Ruggieri ca.1591-1592, vol.5, p.29).¹²

In Catholicism, humans become saints due to the glory of God. On the contrary, in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* the divine being can be the best part of the human being. In this sense, Ruggieri used “saint” to refer to the highest perfection of human nature. However, Ruggieri's translation of *shengren* might lead to controversy in the Catholic Church, which officially denied that Confucius could be called a saint because he did not receive supernatural grace from Christ. But some Confucian Catholics never stopped calling Confucius a sage, or *shengren*. Yan Mo (嚴謨), for example, argued that Confucius was originally called a sage in the sense that he achieved a kind of perfection; that sense still held some appeal to him, even though he realized that Western notions of sainthood differed from his own views of sagehood.¹³

Ruggieri, then, ambiguously translated *shengren* as “saint,” a term that has multiple meanings in the history of Chinese ideas. For Confucius, *shengren* is the ultimate ideal personality in Confucianism. However, to some extent, the sanctification of *shengren* was done by Mencius, who made significant efforts to describe Confucius as *shengren*. Zhu Xi, based on Cheng Yi, considered that humans could become *shengren* due to our good nature (*renxing benshan*, 人性本善); thus, the possibility of becoming a *shengren* depended on practical work, and this meant that becoming a *shengren* was an objective learned through measures external to oneself. Ruggieri's translation of *shengren*, on the one hand, reflects the pursuit of ethical wisdom in Confucianism, and on the other hand, doesn't contradict Aquinas' thought, namely human beings can potentially reach perfection with the aid of God's grace.

5. How Did Ruggieri Translate and Interpret the *Four Books*?

As analysed above, Michele Ruggieri's understanding of Confucius is closely related to his interpretation of the *Four Books*, and this is moreover linked to the issue of whether Confucianism is a “philosophy”. When Ruggieri came to China in the Late Ming, he realized the important status of the *Four Books* in Chinese thought and began to read and study them. As is well known, the *Four Books* were not considered canonical classics at the outset. Their status was elevated from *zhuan* (傳) to *jing* (經), and they finally became the canonical classics known as the *Four Books* (Shu and Wang

¹⁰ “Zicomus ait discendo XXX prudential est; dorando non XXX pietas; pius et prudentia ergo Iam erat sancto XXX, sanctus vir locutus Confucius XXX” See Ruggieri ca.1591-1592, vol.5, p.29. This part of the manuscript was full of holes and the ink from the back was penetrated, which made the manuscript extremely difficult to read.

¹¹ For example, Ruggieri translated “Junzi zhi e yu Chen Cai, 君子之厄於陳、蔡” in Mencius as “Perfectus vir i[d est] Confucius, cum in calamitate esset in Zino et Zeyo Regno”(Ruggieri ca.1591-1592, vol.5, p.45).

¹² D.C. Lau translates this sentence into “Confucius was the sage whose actions were timely” (孔子，聖之時者也), see Mencius. 2004, p.113.

¹³ “我敝國之稱聖，原只是造極之名，如孟子所謂‘美、大、聖、神’者，各有訓解在，非泰西之所謂聖也，泰西特借我國之字耳。我今稱我之原始，非僭也” (*wo biguo zhi cheng sheng, yuan zhishi zaoji zhiming, ru Mengzi suowei 'mei, da, sheng, shen' zhe, geyou xunjie zai, fei taixi zhi suowei sheng ye, taixi te jie woguo zhi zi er. Wo jin cheng wo zhi yuanshi, fei jian ye*). More details can be seen in Lin 1993. Missionaries borrowed Chinese words ‘*shengren*’ to refer to the saints. Not only did the use of *shengren* cause problems, but there were also problems when using the image of Confucius to refer to missionaries. Giulio Aleni (1582-1649), one of the most respected missionaries since Matteo Ricci and Ricci's successor in the Chinese Jesuit Province (1641-1648), was considered as “Confucius from the West” (*xilai kongzi* 西來孔子) by his followers. See Pan 2020.

2007). Their content was incorporated into the Imperial Examination system from the Yuan Dynasty onward.

Ruggieri seized the moment to learn about Chinese culture through the *Four Books*. We may discover evidence of Ruggieri's learning about the *Four Books* from his Chinese poems.¹⁴ The *Four Books* became the texts through which the early Jesuits learned Chinese language and culture. Not only did Ruggieri highly affirm Confucius' thought, but he also praised the *Four Books* in their Chinese environment. This can be seen in Ruggieri's interpretation of the *Four Books*. In his manuscripts, Ruggieri tried to interpret and portray Confucianism as a philosophy. By weaving Western philosophy into his translation, Ruggieri pointed to similarities between Confucianism and Western philosophy. For example, he translated the seventh chapter of *Zhongyong* (according to Zhu Xi's division) using the metaphor of the cave, which is not present in the original classical text nor in the later Chinese commentaries: "Every men say, 'I am a wise man'; when they go forward, they fall into traps and are wrapped in a net, which is spread at the entrance of the cave, and there is no one who can escape from it. Every men say, 'I am a wise man', and when they have once grasped the middle in which virtue always resides, they do not persist in it even for a month" (*Omnes homines dicunt ego sapiens sum; cum progrediuntur, in plagas incidunt et sese reti involvuntur, quod cavernae ostio obtenditur nec est qui inde possit evadere. Omnes homines dicunt: ego sapiens sum, et cum semel medium in quo semper virtus consistit arripuerunt, in eo nec mensem quidem persistunt*) (Ruggieri ca.1591-1592, vol.2, p.17). Ruggieri's translation is more often associated with the metaphor of the cave in Plato's ideas. In my opinion, by introducing Plato's thought into the *Four Books*, Ruggieri implies that Confucianism is similar to Western philosophy.

Furthermore, Ruggieri used words from the Bible to explain the *Four Books*. For example, in his translation of the *Zhongyong*, he used the metaphor of salt: "Besides, if you might have preserved the words with this salt of truth, the troubles will not destroy" (*Verba item si hoc veritatis sale condieris, negocia non excident*) (Ruggieri ca.1591-1592, vol.2, p.30). In his Latin manuscript, he also interpreted some passages through a Biblical lens. For Ruggieri, the spirits Ao and Zao are considered idols that should not be worshipped at all. He translates the words of Confucius as "You should not make sacrificial rituals to idols," which sounds like a Biblical commandment. Ruggieri, using the expression "to sin against Heaven" (*peccare in caelum*) refers to the words of the prodigal son to his father in the Gospel of Luke (Meynard 2015, pp.132-52).

Based on the analysis above, it seems that the *Four Books* were very important to Ruggieri. Since the Bible has been highly regarded through Western history, Ruggieri's way of translating and interpreting the *Four Books* gives the Confucian classics a high status. On the other hand, we cannot neglect mentioning Ruggieri's purpose for returning to Europe. Under the command of Valignano, Ruggieri went back to Europe to propose a papal embassy to China. For that, he needed to prove that Chinese thought was compatible with Catholic thought. Thus, it is likely that Ruggieri wanted to demonstrate that there was sound basis for the work of Catholic missionaries in China.

6. Conclusions: The Effect of Ruggieri's View of Confucius on Other Jesuits

Unlike other Jesuits who later translated the *Four Books*, Ruggieri preferred to interpret the *Four Books* using references to the Bible. Other Jesuits attempted to find religious elements in the *Four Books* that proved that Chinese people had religious roots, whether or not they conflicted with Catholic faith.¹⁵ Ruggieri did not avoid including religious factors in his translations, which seems paradoxical to his emphasis on the rational aspects of Confucian classics.

Ruggieri's translation of the *Four Books* shows that, as early as 1590, Ruggieri had already made significant inroads in establishing Confucius' identity and in understanding Confucian classics. Despite the fact that he used "saint" to translate *shengren*, he successfully conveyed his main point

¹⁴ Albert Chan has translated Ruggieri's Chinese poems into English, see Chan 1993.

¹⁵ For other Jesuits' ways of translating the *Four Books*, see Meynard 2015, pp.132-52.

view that Confucius was a philosopher, a perspective that was subsequently carried on by Ricci and other Jesuits in China for more than 200 years.

During his stay in Zhaoqing, Ricci claimed that he had already begun to translate the *Four Books* into Latin under the command of Valignano.¹⁶ Although Ricci's translation of the *Four Books* has not been found yet, we may still get glimpses of his understanding of Confucius from his other works. In *Della entrata Compagnia di Giesu e Christianita nella Cina*, Ricci held the opinion that Confucius was a philosopher in China and that he was considered "the most holy man who had ever existed" (*il più santo uomo che mai fusse nel mondo*) (Ricci 2000, p.28). Ricci follows Ruggieri's views about Confucius. The difference between Ricci and Ruggieri is that Ricci moves forward by refuting the religious aspects of the notion of the *shengren* and by talking about Confucius strictly from a philosophical perspective. That is, he emphasized that Chinese people perform rituals to Confucius only because they respect his great learning and virtue.

Ricci's successor, Nicolò Longobardi (1559-1654), after reading the *Four Books* and the *Five Classics*, drew an opposite conclusion regarding why Chinese people perform rituals to everything: they are Deists. Furthermore, he rejects Ricci's translation of *Deus*. Those questions drew the attention of other missionaries, who reported it to the Pope. In his work *A brief response on the Controversies over Shangdi, Tianshen and Linghun*, Longobardi differentiated Confucius as a philosopher and Zhu Xi as a commentator, based on the differentiation between philosophers and commentators after the Renaissance.¹⁷

These debates expedited the pace at which other Jesuits translated the *Four Books*. They translated them as textbooks to learn Chinese and to demonstrate their understanding of Chinese thought as being rational and civilized. This was the basis for their argument that Chinese are capable of accepting the Catholic faith. They made this argument in order to gain the support of the Pope for their mission career in China.

In 1662, Inácio Da Costa (1603-1666), together with Prospero Intorcetta (1626-1696), Christian Herdrich (1624-1684) and François de Rougemont (1624-1676) translated and published the *Daxue* while learning Chinese. This translation is known as *Sapientia Sinica*, which contains a brief introduction to Confucius titled *Vita Confucii, Principis Sapientiae Sinicae*. These Jesuits continued Ruggieri and Ricci's understanding of Confucius as a philosopher. They also translated five *juan*, first half of the *Lunyu* to describe Confucius in a specific and vivid way.¹⁸ It is worth noticing that they also made up some details about Confucius: he was humble, acknowledged all his shortcomings, and waited for a Western saint, which for the Jesuits meant Jesus. Therefore, the Jesuits portrayed Confucius as a philosopher with rational ideas who looked forward to the coming of Jesus.

In 1669, another translation of the *Zhongyong* was created by Intorcetta, and first half was published in Canton, second half in Goa, India. It also contains a brief vita of Confucius, which is largely derived from *Sapientia Sinica*. In this book called *Sinarum Scientia Politico-moralis Scientia*, Confucius is considered the father of Chinese philosophy. Meanwhile, Intorcetta argued that worshipping Confucius was not idolatry but was instead an expression of the Chinese people's

¹⁶ It can be seen in Ricci's letter sent to the superior general of the Jesuits in Rome: "Father Visitor [Valignano] has asked me to translate into Latin [Confucian Classics] in order to help prepare a new catechism in Chinese, which is much needed, since the other that we did in the beginning [the Tianzhu shilu] did not turn out to be good as it should have been." See Ricci 2001, p.185.

¹⁷ After the Renaissance, European scholars used the term "philosophers" to refer to Plato, Aristotle, and other ancient scholars, and they used the term "commentators" to refer to Augustine, Aquinas, and other scholars. *Jingxue* in the Ming Dynasty, similar to Biblical exegesis in Medieval theology in Europe, has its own way of interpreting the classics and distinguishing between *xianru* and *houru*. See Li 2017.

¹⁸ Thierry Meynard points out that from that time, Jesuits were already using Zhang Juzheng's *Sishu zhijie* as their translating source by using the interpretations of Cham Colao, which means Zhang Juzheng. See Meynard 2013, pp.111-21.

respectful feelings toward Confucius (Meynard 2013, pp.111-21). He also equalled Confucianism to Confucius and put forward a notion “Confucian School” (*schola confuciana*) (Meynard 2019). In 1687, Philippe Couplet (1623-1693) published the *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* in Paris. This work is comprised mainly of the *Daxue*, *Zhongyong* and *Lunyu*. In accord with Michele Ruggieri, this translation identifies Confucius as a philosopher doing philosophy (*philosophus*) (Meynard 2015, pp.57-60).

François Noël (1651-1729) published his *Sinensis Imperii Libri Classici Sex* in 1711 in Prague, which contains the *Four Books*, *Xiaojing* 孝經, and *Xiaoxue* 小學. In the same year, Noël also published his *Philosophia Sinica tribus tractatibus*. According to Henrik Jaeger, in the third part of this book, Noël linked the central topics of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* to the Confucian classics (i.e., the classics are transformed into a commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* and vice versa). In this “interweaving of texts” there is almost no theological argument or citation. Noël presented Chinese philosophy as philosophy: “We will consider ethics of the unbelieving Chinese from the perspective of the ethics of the unbelieving Aristotle” (*ita considerabimus Ethicam Sinarum ad Ethicam Aristotelis Infidelis*) (Jaeger 2018). Noël, unlike Ricci and Longobardo, linked Neo-Confucianism with Christian philosophy and courageously built up a Confucian Christian philosophy (Meynard and Wang 2017). In this sense, Noël accepted Neo-Confucianism as theism, which was part of the original Confucianism based on his interpretation of Chinese philosophy as philosophy.

By establishing the image of Confucius in the *Four Books* and affirming the position of the *Four Books* in Chinese philosophy, Ruggieri tried to show Westerners a rational Chinese philosophy centred on Confucius. As analysed above, although Ruggieri tried to show the rational aspect of Confucianism in his translation of the *Four Books*, he still maintained that it had religious aspects, especially in his Latin manuscript. However, his understanding of Confucius is still ambiguous. After Ruggieri, other Jesuits attempted to highlight the rational aspects of Confucianism, consider Confucius as a philosopher. As Meynard says, other Jesuits changed the source of the *Four Books* from Zhu Xi to Zhang Juzheng (張居正) (1525-1582), because in Zhang Juzheng’s *Sishu zhijie* 四書集解 there was less complicated philosophical thought interpreted by Zhu Xi. Besides, other Jesuit thought Zhang Juzheng tried to restore the ancient belief by religious thoughts such as “revering heaven” (*jingtian* 敬天), “the interaction between heaven and humanity” (*tianren ganying* 天人感應) and “gods and spirits” (*guishen* 鬼神) in *Sishu zhijie*. Through Zhu Xi’s and Zhang Juzheng’s interpretation of the *Four books*, other Jesuits believed that in Confucius, religion and philosophy were consistent. Confucius was a great philosopher, and acknowledged the existence of *tian* and *guishen* by natural reason (Meynard 2019, p302).

Through the above analysis, it can be seen that before and after the Rites Controversy, there were subtle changes in the Jesuits’ interpretations of Confucius: their portrayal of Confucius became more rationalistic. Regarding the Rites Controversy, Ferrero presented insightful perspectives starting from the first Latin translation of *li* 禮 from the Analects of Confucius. For Ferrero, Ruggieri translated *li* 禮 basically with Latin words meaning “proper social behavior”, “good manners”, and “temperance in relationship”. However, the concept of *li* 禮 has complex meaning, which led to heated debates and painful consequences. The more the Jesuits and other missionaries understood the complexity and variety of “Confucianism”, the more this tradition became not so easy to reconcile with the Christian faith (Ferrero 2024). Other missionaries viewed rituals to Confucius as having religious significance, which they believed contradicted Christian beliefs. Consequently, they voiced opposition to the practice and sought to prohibit such ceremonies. On the contrary, for Jesuits, performing rituals to Confucius was a ritual that paid respects and reverence to Confucius. Due to other missionaries’ opposition to the Jesuits in the Rites Controversy, it prompted the Jesuits to offer rationalistic interpretations of Confucius.

In conclusion, Michele Ruggieri’s identification of Confucius as both a philosopher and a saint implies that despite showing the rational aspects of Confucianism, the religiousness is still in Confucianism. However, other Jesuits who came to China gradually turned to the rational aspects of Confucianism, which influenced enlightenment thinkers’ ways of approaching Chinese thought.

Analysing different views about Confucius' identity helps us understand the characteristics of Chinese thought and the possibility of a Chinese philosophy.

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