

CHRISTIAN WOLFF AND NEO-CONFUCIANISM

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ABSTRACT

It is widely known that Chinese philosophy influenced European philosophers. They had mainly acquired information from the Jesuit missionaries. The Jesuit missionaries studied the Chinese philosophy deeply, in order to propagate Christianity in China effectively from the 16th century.

There was a man who was strongly interested in their information. He was a leader of the German enlightenment, Christian Wolff. When retiring from the position of Prorector in University of Halle, Wolff gave an address «The lecture concerning the practical philosophy of China» (1721). Wolff explained Chinese philosophy as follows: The China was led to the happy state by the ancient kings who used the moral law. Then, the man who studied the law of the sage monarch's experiences was Confucius. Confucius attached greater importance about people's welfares. His theory was taught to all the people through the elementary school and the university in China. Chinese people made an effort to construct the ideal world through the achievement of other people's welfare.

This event was known to a lot of people so far. However, a concrete content of Chinese philosophy that influenced Wolff is not yet so widely researched. Wolff's lecture was based on specific Confucianism classics and commentaries existed as grounds in the Latin translation that he quoted. Classics were *Four Books* that Zhu Xi compiled in Song dynasty, and the commentary was Zhu Xi's, and commentary of the Minister of Education, Zhang Juzheng in Ming dynasty. They both were the thinkers of the Neo-Confucianism. Consequently, Wolff's outlook on Chinese philosophy was decided by the Neo-Confucianism.

To verify the fact of the Chinese philosophy receipt by Wolf, I would like to compare the contents of the Jesuit's translations to which Wolff referenced, original texts of the Chinese classics, and the commentaries.

Key Words: Neo-Confucianism, Christian Wolff, enlightenment

Introduction

It is widely known that Chinese philosophy influenced European philosophical thought during the Enlightenment. In France, Voltaire and Diderot, and in Germany Leibnitz, who had read translations of Chinese thinkers made by Jesuit missionaries, regarded Chinese philosophy as an ideal philosophy.

Jesuit missionaries studied Chinese philosophy deeply in order to propagate Christianity in China effectively from the 16th century. One of the most famous of these missionaries was Matteo Ricci, who maintained that the divine and spiritual existences that appeared in ancient Confucian classics corresponded with the God and spiritual concepts of Christianity. At that time he criticized Neo-Confucianism— which in those days was regarded as orthodox Confucianism interpretation— because it rationalized all problems. However, Ricci praised the moral conceptions of Confucianism that did not contradict Christianity and European ethics. His standpoint was based on the compromise stance in order to raise the effectiveness of Christianity propagation, but it was also based on believing the universality of the revelation of God.

After that, the successors of Ricci understood that among the Chinese philosophies, Confucianism was the most orthodox, and believed that Confucianism and Christianity were essentially in agreement. In addition, missionaries thought that Confucianism held common beliefs with the European philosophy and ethics regarding human nature and reason.

One person who was particularly interested in examinations of Chinese philosophy was the leader of the German Enlightenment, Christian Wolff.

I would like to talk about Wolff's interpretation of Chinese philosophy, comparing it with the Confucian text with the commentaries of the Neo-Confucianism and the translations of the missionaries.

Phillippe Couplet –*Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (1687)–

Conciliatory gestures to different cultures enjoyed some success at the time of propagation, but strict adherence missionaries strongly criticized them because they removed the heterogeneity of Christianity.

In response to the criticism from such strict groups, Jesuit missionaries led by Phillippe Couplet attempted to defend Chinese philosophy. Couplet published *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* at the behest of Louis XIV, who had an interest in Chinese philosophy and politics. *Confucius Sinarum*

Philosophus consists of an *explanation* of Chinese philosophy in general and Latin translations of three books of *Four Books of Confucianism*: *Da Xue* (*The Great Learning*), *Zhong Yong* (*The Doctrine of the Mean*), *Lun Yu* (*The Analects of Confucius*) and chronological table of china.

Like Ricci, Couplet insisted that there was no contradiction between Chinese philosophy and Christian doctrine. But the demonstrative method of Couplet was more critical. When interpreting Confucian texts, he criticized Zhu Xi's interpretation, preferring instead the commentary of Ming Dynasty prime minister and Minister of Education, Zhang Juzheng, because of its straightforwardness. In addition he acknowledged the transcendental character and personality of the divine and spiritual existences.

But there was another important point-- Zhang Juzheng's commentary emphasized the importance of human nature. That's because rationalism of Neo-Confucianism became common in the Ming dynasty, and there was increasing consideration of human nature. Couplet's work was based on an explanatory commentary of Zhang Juzheng and he understood that Chinese philosophy highly regarded human rational nature (*natura rationalis*) or reason (*ratio*) as being important and emphasized this point in his translation.

Incidentally, immediately after the publication of Couplet's work, Wolff's teacher, Leibniz, read this translation. However it is still unknown what exact influence, if any, this work had on Leibniz.

François Noël –*Sinensis Imperii Libri Classici Sex* (1711)–

Couplet's view on Chinese philosophy, especially Neo-Confucianism in the Song to Ming dynasties, was favorable to its valuing the human rational nature, but he was critical of or ignored the points which were contrary to Christian doctrine. For example, Couplet challenged the view of Zhu Xi who insisted that spiritual existence possessed material elements, and did not translate *Mencius*, which explains the theory of good human nature and revolutionary thought, although it's one of *Four Books of Confucianism*.

In contrast with Couplet's translation which adhered to the Christian sense of values, Noël showed an attitude which relied on rational interpretation of Neo-Confucianism. The outcome was *Sinensis Imperii Libri Classici Sex*, Noël's translation of the entire texts of the *Four Books* with many explanations of Zhu Xi and Zhang Juzheng. Furthermore, he translated without reserve *Xiao Jing* ("Filial Piety") which explained

the cosmological theory of family relationships in China, and *Xiao Xue* (“Elementary Learning”) which reflected Zhu Xi’s opinion about elementary education.

Noël’s translation was less religiously-based than Couplet’s, and when he translated classics, he made an effort to reflect accurately the rational interpretations of Neo-Confucianists such as Zhu Xi and Zhang Juzheng. For example, he interpreted *Tian* (“Heaven”) as orderliness of the movement of celestial bodies, and rational nature as a root of human virtues.

Christian Wolff – *Oratio de Sinarum philosophia practica* (Discourse on the Practical Philosophy of the Chinese) (1721)–

After retiring from the position of President at the University of Halle, Christian Wolff gave an address titled “*Discourse on the Practical Philosophy of the Chinese*” (1721) in which he maintained that Chinese philosophy was the oldest philosophy in the world. He explained Chinese philosophy as follows: China had been led to a blissful state by the ancient emperors who used moral law. Later, Confucius studied and systematized the law of the sage monarchs. However, because Confucius attached greater importance to people’s welfare, Wolff further maintained that Confucius’s morality was equal to that of Jesus Christ.

The Theory of Confucianism was taught to all students through elementary school and university in China. At the university level, intellect and reason were taught and developed through the research of historical experiences of humanity and the essence of all things. The Chinese were constantly striving to improve reason as much as possible and free will became a focus of philosophical thought. Moreover, the Chinese made an effort to construct an ideal world by contributing to other people’s welfare. By using only their rational ability, they were able to reach a state of bliss without knowing Christianity, etc.

Wolff’s opinion incurred the wrath of pietistic Protestant professors in the University of Halle. They demanded that the Prussian king banish Wolff, and the king offered Wolff the choice of capital punishment or exile. However, this action aroused a strong interest in Wolff’s thought among European intellectuals. Afterwards, Wolff was called back to Prussia by the new king, Frederick the Great, who respected him, and Wolff’s thought spread throughout Europe.

These historical events are well known. However the specifics of Chinese philosophy that influenced Wolff have not yet been widely

researched. Wolff's lecture was not akin to criticizing the current state of Europe by imagining China as the ideal, because certain Confucian classics and commentary existed as grounds in the Latin translations that he quoted. The classics were the *Four Books* that Zhu Xi compiled, and the commentary of Zhu Xi of the Song dynasty and that of Zhang Juzheng of the Ming dynasty, Neo-Confucian thinkers. Wolff's outlook on Chinese philosophy was based on Confucianism that had been restructured by Neo-Confucianism.

It is important to note that the understanding of Chinese philosophy by one of the main philosophers of The Enlightenment, Christian Wolff, was grounded on missionaries' translations during the Age of Reason that referred to the commentaries of Neo-Confucianists in an effort to achieve a rational interpretation of the classics. Namely, the texts of Chinese philosophy which had passed double and triple scrutiny formed the basis from which the rationalist Christian Wolff came to understand Chinese philosophy. I would like to compare Wolff's *Oratio de Sinarum philosophia practica* (1721), and the commentary book about the lecture published in 1726, with translations of the missionaries, and the Confucian classics and commentaries on which they were based. Here, I would like to focus on the problems discussed in two of the the *Four Books*: *Da Xue* ("Great Learning") and *Zhong Yong* ("Doctrine of the Mean").

Principle of Sufficient Reason

In *Oratio de Sinarum philosophia practica*, Wolff cited the following based in part on Noël's translation: "The Chinese were making an effort to achieve good government. Though they knew neither God nor the next life, they had acquired worldly happiness. To reach this goal, the master of the family regulated his own moral habits and life. Before participating in politics, the family should be guided. If a small number of familiar people cannot be managed, a lot of unfamiliar people cannot be guided. It is necessary for someone who will teach another person to conduct himself exemplarily."

Wolff made his own commentary about this point: "One can read this from Couplet's translation of *Da Xue*. The ancient Chinese kings and emperors desiring to rule their countries justly, they had been likewise leading their own families justly beforehand. Furthermore desiring to lead their families justly, they had been adorning and improving their bodies beforehand. Desiring to improve their bodies, they had been rectifying their spirit beforehand. Desiring to rectify their spirit, they had been true in their

intention beforehand. Desiring to be true in their intention, they had been completing their intelligence beforehand. It is however still to be added, that completing intelligence was achieved by exhaustively considering the reasons or grounds (*rationes*) of everything”¹.

Thus, the ultimate prerequisite for ruling society justly, and for achieving complete intelligence, is to discern or elucidate the reasons or grounds of all things.

In fact, this completely corresponds to the part at the beginning of *Da Xue* that explains the ideals of Confucianism. However, concerning the last sentence as the ultimate prerequisite, there are various interpretations, and it is difficult to make any definitive conclusions. The interpretation I mentioned is based on the commentary of Zhu Xi. Couplet, who frequently criticized Zhu Xi, and Noël, who supported Neo-Confucianism, expressed similar approval of this interpretation.

For example, Couplet translated this last part “The ability to complete the intellectual power (*vis intellectiva*), that is, to lead the way to the highest apex, lies in penetrating or drawing up reasons of all things exhaustively”². Noël translated it as “the method of arriving at a complete concept of good and evil, consists of investigation which elucidates the essences and reasons of things or of the philosophy”³. Although the manner of the two translations differs, both of them conform to Zhang Juzheng's commentary. Namely, “If you wish to exert intelligence, (you should focus on) investigating *Li* (reason). Truly, once you arrive at the ultimate point, there is no longer need for exhaustive investigation in intelligence”⁴. Couplet and Noël—through the commentary of Zhang Juzheng (or Zhu Xi) – Understood *Li* as being reason or essence, and interpreted that to mean

¹ *Volentes* (scilicet prisci Reges & Imperatores) recte administrare suum regnum, prius item recte instituebant suam familiam. Rursum volentes recte instituere suam familiam domesticam prius recte componebant seu excolebant suum ipsorum corpus. Volentes recte componere suum ipsorum corpus, prius rectificabant suum animum. Volentes autem rectificare suum animum, prius verificabant suam intentionem. Volentes verificare suam intentionem prius perficiebant intellectum. Additur autem intellectum perfici exhauriendo rerum omnium rationes. (Wolff, Christian: *Oratio de Sinarum philosophia practica* : lat.-dt. = Rede über die praktische Philosophie der Chinesen / Christian Wolff, Übers., eingel. u. hrsg. von Michael Albrecht. - Hamburg : Meiner, 1985, n. 101.)

² Perficere, seu ad summum apicem perducere vim intellectivam, consistit in penetrando, sive exhauriendo res omnes, seu rerum omnium rationes. (Prosperi Intorcetta, Christiani Herdrich, Francisci Rougemont, Philippi Covplet, *Confucius sinarum philosophus*, Parisiis, 1687, p. 4.)

³ Modus denique assequendi perfectam Boni & Mali notitiam, constitit in perscrutandis rerum naturis ac rationibus, sive philosophiae studio. (P. Francisco Noël, *Sinensis Imperii Libri Classici Sex*, Pragae; 1711, p. 11.)

⁴ Original *Da Xue* text

古之欲明明德於天下者、先治其國。欲治其國者、先齊其家。欲齊其家者、先脩其身。欲脩其身者、先正其心。欲正其心者、先誠其意。欲誠其意者、先致其知。致知在格物。 (『大學』原文)

that the ancient Chinese philosophers insisted on elucidating reason.

Furthermore, Wolff related this point of *Da Xue*, referring to yet another commentary: “In *Da Xue*, Confucius, in order to transform moral precepts into general rules, ordered (his followers) to have an interest in raising the level of reason by perfecting intelligence as much as possible”.

Wolff described Confucius’ reasoning in this way: “Confucius recognized that all things possess reason, and ordered man to discern the reasons of all things in *Zhong Yong*.” Immediately after that, Wolff quoted the beginning part of *Da Xue* saying, “Confucius ordered that when those are finally recognized, Intention is to be amended, in order to be free from all untruths, and when Intention is amended, Desire should be controlled in order that all behaviors will coincide with the reason (*ratio*) in the highest degree.”⁵

In other words, Wolff interpreted this to mean that it is necessary for all behaviors to coincide with the reasons (*rationes*) of all things and should be recognized as a prerequisite. He presented a quite original classical interpretation of *Da Xue* based on the interpretations of Neo-Confucianism. Because Wolff saw that two Chinese classics, *Da Xue* and *Zhong Yong*, whose formation and circumstances would have been different, had similarity, he associated them together and concluded that Chinese philosophy made much of *ratio*.

Furthermore, the passages from *Zhong Yong* cited here through Wolff correspond to the 12th chapter of the text which Zhu Xi compiled. Wolff’s interpretation in itself, is abstracted quite rationally. The translation of Couplet which he referred to is like this: “The regulations of perfect men (*perfectorum* regula) in medium to be followed are vast and universal, but

Zhu Xi’s commentary

治、平聲。後放此。明明德於天下者、使天下之人皆有以明其明德也。心者、身之所主也。誠、實也。意者、心之所發也。實其心之所發、欲其一於善而無自欺也。致、推極也。知、猶識也。推極吾之知識、欲其所知無不盡也。格、至也。物、猶事也。窮至事物之理、欲其極處無不到也。此八者、大學之條目也。（朱子『大學章句』經第一章）

Zhang Juzheng’s commentary

若要推極其知、在於窮究事物之理、直到那至極的去處、然後所知無有不尽。（張居正『大學直解』經第一章）

⁵ *Confucius in Schola adultorum* praecepta morum ad regulas generales revocaturus hanc principem jubet esse curam, ut rationem excolas intellectum perficiendo, quantum fieri potest. Agnovit enim *Confucius* omnia habere suam rationem, Scient. Sin. Lib. 2. f. 46. & operam dare jubet, ut rerum omnium rationes perspiciamus. His demum cognitis, rectificandam praecipit intentionem, ut ab omni fuco aliena sit; & hac rectificata moderandos esse appetitus ut omnes omnino actiones summam habeant cum ratione conformitatem. (Christian Wolff, *op. cit.*, n. 58)

the innermost effect and reason in things are minute and exquisite, and hidden, and so are almost unrecognized.... Thus there is nothing big in which reason does not inhere, nor is there anything little which is lacking in reason.”

However the original text of *Zhong Yong* is very simple. Yet, if there are no commentaries, it is difficult to understand. Indeed, Couplet’s interpretation relied upon Zhang Juzheng’s commentary which was based on Neo-Confucianism. Zhang Juzheng’s commentary is as follows: “The way of the man of virtue has substance and functions. The functions are immense, infinite, the substance is exquisite, invisible... So when talking about its size, it is infinite, and there is nothing in this world which is able to cover and carry it. Heaven covers [everything], the earth carries [everything], there is nothing which is not a function of this Way. As for its minuteness, it is so infinitesimal that there is nothing with which it can be analyzed and opened in this world. However, there is nothing, even the minutest of things, which this Way does not penetrate. And why is there anything which can go inside it, and break it?”⁶

Detailed interpretation like this had probably reflected Couplet’s translation.

In other words, Wolff’s refined classical interpretation become possible through the explanations of Zhang Juzheng, Couplet and others. Referring to the translations of both Couplet and Noël, Wolff believed the most proper explanations were to be Confucius’s thought, which were thus the essence of Chinese philosophy.

Incidentally, the passage expressed with the double negative “So there is nothing big in which reason isn’t inherent, and there is nothing little which is lacking in reason” in Couplet’s translation of *Zhong Yong*, is rephrased by Wolff as “all things are possessing of reason”. Moreover, Wolff expressed Chinese philosophy using such principles as the “Principle of Sufficient Reason for Moral Matters”, and concluded that Chinese philosophy was “profound wisdom”.

The “Principle of Sufficient Reason (*principium rationis sufficientis*)” is the principle which Wolff’s teacher, Leibniz, maintained meant that all possible things have reason, there is nothing without reason. In Wolff’s opinion, this was evidence that ancient Chinese philosophers had the most advanced theory at that time. Although this might not have been the

⁶ *Perceptorum* in medio sectando via usu ampla est & universalis; & tamen intima illius vis ac ratio in re parva est & subtilis ac recondita, adeoque a paucis cognita. ... nulla res adeo magna est, in qua ratio non insit; nulla item adeo exigua, quae ratione quadam careat. (Philippi Couplet, *op. cit.*, p. 46)

case, Wolff understood the secret principles of the Chinese philosophy were raising rational ability through man's discerning and elucidating the inherent reasons or grounds of all things, and by that, man becomes an autonomous being which leads the world to a state of bliss.

Relating with Reason in Chinese Philosophy

Concerning such problems, Wolf talked about the particularity of reason in China. According to Wolff, the Chinese did not know natural religion and worship of the "true God", only natural power, the light of reason (*rationis lumen*) was known. However, the Chinese acquired happiness, or bliss, by using reason as much as possible. Furthermore, invoking the law of nature (*lex naturalis*) of Grotius, Wolff understood that Chinese moral theory also recognized that a merger of ethics with rational nature led to the formation of behavioral norms.

Wolff has shown the grounds here too. Referring to Couplet's translation of *Zhong Yong*,⁷ he quoted Confucius as follows: "That which coincides with rational nature, is the rule by which behavior should be arranged. This conforms to reason. The discipline of virtues exists in order to control us and things which belong to us". This is the introduction of *Zhong Yong*, which, according to Neo-Confucianism, is the famous passage which explains that essential human nature originated from heavenly law, *Tian ming*.

Regarding the nature bestowed upon human beings, the missionaries considered it to be corresponding to reason (*ratio*) to measure an action, and Wolff agreed. But it is characteristic of Wolff that he held that reason in China had formed without belief or natural religion, yet it attained the desired effect.

It can be thought that such interpretation reflected Wolff's ideal of Chinese philosophy. However, he was relying on informations that had

⁷ Original *Zhong Yong* text

君子之道費而隱。…故君子語大、天下莫能載焉。語小、天下莫能破焉。（『中庸』原文）

Zhu Xi's commentary

費、用之廣也。隱、體之微也。…君子之道、近自夫婦居室之間、遠而至於聖人天地之所不能盡。其大無外、其小無內。可謂費矣。然其理之所以然、則隱而莫之見也。蓋可知可能者、道中之一事。及其至、而聖人不知不能、則舉全體而言。聖人固有所不能盡也。…。（朱子『中庸章句』第十二章）

Zhang Juzheng's commentary

君子之道、有体有體、其用廣大、而無窮、其體則微密、而不可見者也。…故就其大處說、則其大無外、天下莫能承載得起。雖天地之覆載、亦莫非斯道之運用也。豈復有出於其外、而能載之者乎。就其小處說、則其小無內、天下莫能剖破得開。雖事物之細微、亦莫非斯道之所貫徹也。又孰有入於其內、而能破之者乎。（張居正『中庸直解』第十二章）

already been provided by missionaries, which had been influenced by strong rationalization. Moreover, the explanatory commentaries which the missionaries themselves had depended on were influenced by the rationalism of Neo-Confucianism. Now that the word *ratio* appeared in a translated passage of a Chinese classic, Wolff, who was a typical European intellectual of his time, would be forced to examine its validity with an open mind. In other words, Wolff arrived at the concept of perfection of man by reason which did not directly concern religion, by multiple filtered rational interpretations. Wolff wanted to publicize such a feature of reason in Chinese philosophy, even under the threat of exile.