

Allegoresis

Reading
Canonical
Literature
East and
West

Zhang
Longxi





ALLEGORESIS



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**Reading Canonical
Literature East and West**

ZHANG LONGXI

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To my father Zhang Xidu,
who first taught me how to read.



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ALLEGORESIS

Introduction: The Validity of Cross-Cultural Understanding

Q*ue sai-je?*” asks the skeptic, Michel de Montaigne. If the validity of knowledge is a basic question applied to self-understanding, that question may appear far more importunate when one tries to understand things in languages and cultures that are set apart and that form very different identities, traditions, and histories. For cross-cultural understanding, therefore, China may offer a useful test case, because the mere distance between China and the West, in geographical as well as in cultural terms, makes it especially important to examine, first of all, the possibility of knowing: the grounds upon which one can claim to comprehend things, make legitimate use of terms and concepts, and acquire knowledge cross-culturally. Here we may encounter a skepticism that goes deeper than Montaigne’s—a skepticism that does not ask, “What do I know?” but more fundamentally, “How do I know?” or “How *can* I know?” The question challenges not just the content but the very possibility of knowing; and it raises doubts about the validity of cross-cultural understanding, the viability of intersubjective transference of consciousness and sensibility.

The aim of this book is to answer the challenging questions as to what and how one knows about different cultures, to inquire into the condition of knowledge that one may acquire beyond one’s own linguistic and cultural parameters, and to establish the theoretical ground for the viability of East-West studies. Although discussion of such issues may cover a wide range of topics, it focuses on the reading of literature, the relationship between text and reading, and particularly the question of allegory and

allegorical interpretation. Allegory, a trope that many consider to be quintessentially Greek and Western, becomes a suitable test of the possibility of cross-cultural knowledge. Whether the concept of allegory—namely, a text with double-structured meaning—can be usefully deployed in the discussion of texts and interpretations in China as well as the West, or to put it differently, whether allegory can be translated not only linguistically but also conceptually across the gap of cultural differences, will be the main problem investigated in this book.

Chapter 1 establishes some basic notions in order to clear the ground for building a case for allegory in the context of Chinese tradition. Chapter 2 discusses the problem of allegorical interpretation in the reading of two canonical texts influential in the West and East respectively: the biblical interpretation of the Song of Songs and traditional commentaries on the Chinese *Book of Poetry*. Chapter 3 explores the question of allegorical interpretation in terms of its ideological premises; it argues for the importance of literal sense as the ground upon which one may discriminate and evaluate various allegorical readings, while guarding against willful misunderstanding and misinterpretations. Chapter 4 considers utopian and anti-utopian literature as essentially allegorical, because utopia articulates the desirability of a social vision that always lies beyond the reality we know and the language of utopian description, and thus invites us to reach its realm in bold imagination. Ironically, however, the utopian ideal appears to contain the seed of its own dialectical negation, thus giving rise to anti-utopias, which reveal another aspect or layer of the ideal's meaning. Finally, chapter 5 offers some thoughts on the political implications of allegorical reading. Because politics requires commitment and allegiance, as a mode of interpretation, allegoresis can be shown to incur political and ethical responsibilities. After all, the decision to interpret is a decision to take sides that has political consequences.

The discussion of allegory, however, forms part of a larger problem: the viability of cross-cultural understanding. That is why Montaigne's question is so appropriate and why in answering Montaigne we need to investigate texts and interpretations across linguistic and cultural divides, above all, the real and imaginary distances between China and the West.

Of Fish and Knowledge: The Translatability of Terms

Before we look into the matter of cross-cultural knowledge more closely, let us first contemplate the following debate, formulated as a delightfully witty conversation between two ancient Chinese philosophers, Zhuangzi

(369?–286? B.C.E.) and his rival, the captious but invariably outwitted Huizi. Their interesting debate on the validity of knowledge will illuminate the situation of knowing and the known, and thus help us focus on the theoretical assumptions in our own effort at cross-cultural understanding:

Zhuangzi and Huizi are strolling on the bridge over the Hao River. “Out there a shoal of white minnows are swimming freely and leisurely,” says Zhuangzi. “That’s what the fish’s happiness is.” “Well, you are not a fish, how do you know about fish’s happiness?” Huizi contends. “You are not me, how do you know that I do not know about fish’s happiness?” retorts Zhuangzi. “I am not you, so I certainly do not know about you,” Huizi replies. “But you are certainly not a fish, and that makes the case complete that you do not know what fish’s happiness is.” “Shall we go back to where we started?” says Zhuangzi. “When you said ‘how do you know about fish’s happiness?’ you asked me because you already knew that I knew it. I knew it above the Hao River.”¹

The last statement, that Zhuangzi knew fish’s happiness “above the Hao River,” as A. C. Graham observes, asserts the relative validity of knowledge, that “all knowing is relative to viewpoint,” namely, acquired at a particular locale in one’s lived world, related to the circumscribed whole of one’s “concrete situation.”² The emphasis here on the situatedness or circumstantiality is rather significant as it puts knowledge in a real, specific, and historical context and thereby differentiates it from the abstract notion of all-inclusive, transcendental knowledge based on pure reason. Here Zhuangzi appears to have articulated a concept of knowledge completely embedded in historicity and aided by a sort of empathetic imagination, with its claim to truth based on the specific ways in which the knowing subject and the known object are interconnected rather than on the abstract universality of mental faculties. Perhaps this is the kind of knowledge that reminds us of Aristotle’s notion of practical knowledge in his distinction between *phronesis* and *episteme*, or practical and theoretical knowledge, a distinction “which cannot be reduced,” as Hans-Georg Gadamer remarks, “to that between the true and the probable. Practical knowledge, *phronesis*, is another kind of knowledge.”³ Thus against the

1. Guo Qingfan (1844–95?), *Zhuangzi jishi*, xvii, in vol. 3 of *Zhuazi jicheng* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1954), pp. 267–68. Hereafter abbreviated as *Zhuangzi*.

2. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, p. 81.

3. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 21. For *phronesis*, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*: “That practical wisdom is not scientific knowledge is evident; for it is, as has been said, concerned with the ultimate particular fact, since the thing to be done is of this nature” (VI, 8,

challenge of skepticism, Zhuangzi insists on the cognitive value of his situated knowledge as valid knowledge, even though he may fully admit his all too human finitude and fallibility. But when we speak of Zhuangzi's situated knowledge as *phronesis*, we are inviting the same skeptical challenge; we put ourselves in the same position as Zhuangzi, where, from the skeptic's point of view, the very possibility of knowing becomes highly questionable. It is indeed the same question with which we began, the question or doubt about cross-cultural understanding: Can we speak of Zhuangzi and Aristotle in the same context? Is Zhuangzi advocating knowledge as a kind of *phronesis*? Can such terms and concepts be translated at all? These are the most basic questions we must address before we can claim to attain any knowledge at all across the gaps of languages and cultures.

Like the other similar anecdotal arguments in the *Zhuangzi*, the disputation "above the Hao River" purports to illustrate Zhuangzi's philosophy and present it as superior to its rival positions. What is remarkable about this particular anecdote, as Graham notes, is its playfulness, which "in parodying logical debate is more faithful to the detail of its structure than anything else in *Chuang-tzŭ*."⁴ Graham, however, seems to fall short of our expectation to bring out the full force of Zhuangzi's argument when he remarks that the philosopher in this passage is "making fun of [Huizi] for being too logical," and that Zhuangzi can offer "no answer to 'How do you know?'" except a clarification of the viewpoint from which you know."⁵ But insofar as practical or moral knowledge is concerned, the viewpoint from which one knows is the only perspective available in human understanding; that is to say, human knowledge is very often situated, conditioned, and its truth very often finite and relative.

Zhuangzi's knowledge about fish is not absolute in the sense that he cannot know fish as only a fish can, but hardly any knowledge worth having is absolute in that sense. Zhuangzi suggests that one does not have to *be* a fish to *know about* fish, for one's knowledge always has something of one's own in it. In Zhuangzi's claim to knowledge, there is surely a sense of playfulness and empathetic enjoyment, a vicarious pleasure that expresses his own happiness in seeing the free and graceful movement of the minnows, which Huizi completely missed or neglected in questioning the logical validity of Zhuangzi's claim. But the crucial point Zhuangzi makes in this passage, as I understand it, is not to counter Huizi's dry logic with a loose and slippery sophism, but to pursue that

The Basic Works of Aristotle, ed. Richard McKeon, p. 1030.

4. Graham, *Chuang-tzŭ: The Inner Chapters*, p. 123.

5. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, pp. 80, 81.

logic vigorously to its very end (or more precisely in this case, to its starting point) where it turns into its own negation. To be thoroughly skeptical about knowledge, Zhuangzi suggests, one must either give up the possibility of asking any question at all insofar as questioning already presumes the certainty of knowing something amiss, or—which comes to the same thing—one must admit that presumed certainty of one's negative knowledge. That is to say, by pushing Huizi's argument *ad absurdum*, Zhuangzi shows that his contender is not logical enough, that the skepticism of knowledge already presupposes, ironically but necessarily, knowledge of a certain kind, and that the answer to "How do you know?" is already implicit in the question, if only because it is asking about something already assumed to be known.

Skepticism and knowledge are thus revealed to be mutually implicated in a dialectical relationship. Notice that for all his doubts about Zhuangzi's knowledge, Huizi never has a moment of doubt about what he knows, namely, that Zhuangzi is not a fish, ergo he does not know fish's happiness. Throughout the conversation, Huizi's negative knowledge, his conviction that there is a difference between Zhuangzi and a fish, between "you" and "I," is stated most positively and assuredly. His skeptical attitude toward knowledge thus rests on his unreflective confidence in his own negative knowledge of the difference of things. For Zhuangzi, however, differentiation is arbitrary and the difference between man and fish is by no means a fact established a priori; thus in positing difference as an unquestioned known fact, Huizi already asserts the possibility of knowledge despite himself. It is Zhuangzi who proves to be truly radical in questioning the very logicity of differentiation, while Huizi never reaches that level of questioning. But if Huizi can have knowledge about Zhuangzi across the gap of intersubjective difference (between "you" and "I"), we must also grant Zhuangzi the knowledge about fish across another gap of intersubjectivity (between "man" and "fish"). And that, in fact, is how Chinese commentators have traditionally read this passage.⁶ However counterintuitive it may appear, such a reading follows a stringent logic that refuses to take for granted any conventional notion of difference.

One may protest that the difference between man and fish is of a different kind from that between Zhuangzi and the rival philosopher, and that the former is a greater and more obvious difference than the latter; but in that case we are arguing, like Huizi, on the basis of our conventional

6. In his exegesis of this passage, Cheng Xuanying (fl. 637–655) thus rephrases Zhuangzi's retort to Huizi: "If you argue that I am not a fish and therefore cannot know about fish, then how can you, who are not me, know about me? If you are not me and yet can know about me, then, I, though not a fish, can know about fish." *Zhuangzi*, xvii, p. 268.

notions of difference. Instead of doubting the possibility of knowing, we implicitly assert, again like Huizi, differences of various kinds and degrees as given facts already known intuitively. Zhuangzi, however, is far too philosophical to honor such conventional notions. If everything is either a “this” (*shi*) or a “that” (*bi*), he wonders whether there is any real distinction between the two categories except when viewed from a certain perspective. The deictic function of all words and categories is predicated on a certain point of view, a certain center of consciousness from which the rest of the world is seen as differentiated, fragmented, and knowable. But “every *this* is also a *that*; every *that* is also a *this*,” says Zhuangzi. “*That* has its sense of right and wrong, and *this* also has its sense of right and wrong. Are there really *this* and *that*? Or are there no such things as *this* and *that*?”⁷ Such truly skeptical and relativist reasoning is typical of Zhuangzi, but it serves to destabilize the fixation on difference as the basis of some absolute knowledge.

In his great “synthesising vision” of the universe, Zhuangzi tends to see all things as equal to one another in their primordial, natural, undifferentiated condition, and to regard all differentiation as arbitrarily made to facilitate human understanding.⁸ The equality or non-differentiation of things constitutes the central theme of the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, and at the end of that chapter, where he recounts a fascinating dream of his, the philosopher claims that he is never sure whether he is dreaming or awake, whether he is a man dreaming of being a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming of being Zhuangzi the philosopher.⁹ He is not, however, perversely denying all differences or their usefulness, but he does refuse to attach any special value to difference or the negative knowledge based on it. By revealing the undeclared assumptions of Huizi’s argument, he shows that all knowledge, negative as well as positive, has only relative validity, and that the negative moment necessarily contains and depends on a prior moment of the positive knowledge of differentiation. Ultimately, therefore, Graham is right to see the whole debate between Zhuangzi and Huizi as an argument for the relativity of knowledge. From that perspective, then, it would be untenable to insist on either the

7. *Zhuangzi*, ii, p. 32.

8. The term “synthesising vision” is Graham’s. The theme of the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, Graham maintains, is “the defence of a synthesising vision against Confucians, Mohists and Sophists, who analyse, distinguish alternatives and debate which is right or wrong.” Graham, *Chuang-tzŭ: The Inner Chapters*, p. 48.

9. See *Zhuangzi*, ii, pp. 53–54. Though less radical in doubting the difference of identities, Montaigne in a different context also asks: “When I play with my cat, who knows if I am not a pastime to her more than she is to me?” “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, 2:12, p. 331.

absolute validity of knowledge or its absolute impossibility, and to make a truth-claim based on negative knowledge would appear just as pretentious as a dogmatic statement of truth.

Relativism, Universalism, and the Rites Controversy

The question of the validity of knowledge, of how to “establish and transmit understanding across the boundaries of language, geography, culture, and time,” says David D. Buck, “lies at the very heart of Asian studies,” or, one might say, cross-cultural studies in general.¹⁰ Buck identifies cultural relativism and evaluative universalism as the two most commonly used paradigms in Asian studies, and succinctly describes the core of relativist thinking as a skeptical attitude toward “the issue of whether any conceptual tools exist to understand and interpret human behavior and meaning in ways that are intersubjectively valid.”¹¹ But to speak of *human* behavior at all is already to have acknowledged the possibility of intersubjective understanding, or otherwise one can only describe one’s own behavior empirically, without ever going beyond the strictly personal and subjective and comparing it with anyone else’s to gain knowledge that pertains to the human, that is, intersubjective, condition. Buck’s observation, however, concerns understanding across the gap of languages and cultures, which is presumably a much wider gap than that of mere intersubjectivity, and in which the cultural differences involved are assumed to be much greater than differences within the same culture. It is for cross-cultural studies that Buck raises the question whether conceptual tools are available across the gaps of fundamental differences.

In recognizing the importance of linguistic, national, ethnic and other differences and in questioning the viability of using conceptual tools that are intersubjectively valid, Buck’s relativist seems to bear some resemblance to Huizi, whose objection to Zhuangzi, as we have seen, is predicated on the recognition of fundamental differences. Zhuangzi, on the other hand, may resemble the universalist in assuming a shared sensibility and common knowledge beyond difference or differentiation. As Buck describes it, however, the universalist position is not really universal but culturally specific, for it is a position related to Western colonialism and imperialism, the ethnocentric position adopted by those Europeans and

10. Buck, editor’s introduction, “Forum on Universalism and Relativism in Asian Studies,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 50 (Feb. 1991): 29.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

North Americans who “chauvinistically held that their civilization was superior to others.”¹² Here we may see the influence of a predominant relativist paradigm in studying alien cultures and societies, a paradigm that has increasingly gained ground since the 1960s when Western philosophers and cultural anthropologists began to argue for the internal coherence of cultural values and beliefs, the necessity to abandon narrow and ethnocentric Western views and to avoid imposing them on non-Western cultures. This seems to be a morally commendable gesture of cultural critique, by means of which Western scholars genuinely try to dissociate themselves from the racism and cultural hegemony of an embarrassing and erroneous past of Western colonialism.

The change of paradigms in cultural studies, however, proves to be much more complicated than the mere denunciation of colonialism. As Richard Bernstein argues, in the entire range of human and social sciences in recent times, there is a “movement from confidence to skepticism about foundations, methods, and rational criteria of evaluation,” and as a result the relativist paradigm reigns everywhere. “There seems to be almost a rush to embrace various forms of relativism. Whether we reflect on the nature of science, or alien societies, or different historical epochs, or sacred and literary texts, we hear voices telling us that there are no hard ‘facts of the matter’ and that almost ‘anything goes.’”¹³ Once the old positivistic dogmas concerning reality, objectivity, rationality, and truth are exposed as prejudices and illusions, and once a rigid objectivism or metaphysical realism collapses, nothing seems able to check the swing of the pendulum in the paradigmatic change from objectivism toward relativism.

In this respect, the controversy around Peter Winch’s works is quite significant. Drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of language games and arguing against the positivistic notion of objective truth, Winch maintains that knowledge or truth does not coincide with any reality outside the language in which that knowledge or truth is expressed, and that different cultures may understand reality differently and may have distinct rules for playing their language games. “Reality is not what gives language sense,” says Winch in one of his most controversial essays. “What is real and what is unreal shows itself *in* the sense that language has.”¹⁴ If different cultures are all different forms of life engaged in different language games, and if there is nothing outside the various languages to provide an independent basis for description and evaluation, this type of thinking would lead

12. Ibid.

13. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, p. 3.

14. Winch, “Understanding a Primitive Society,” in *Ethics and Action*, p. 12.

inevitably to a sweeping cultural relativism that sees various cultures as totally incommensurable, intelligible only to those already living within limits of a specific cultural system. Winch's argument tends to lead precisely to such a relativism, even though he himself maintains that "men's ideas and beliefs must be checkable by reference to something independent—some reality," and he explicitly rejects "an extreme Protagorean relativism."¹⁵ Bernstein tries to disentangle Winch's argument from the very relativism Winch disclaims, but in his own critique, he also points out the controversial aspect of Winch's works that does seem "to entail a new, sophisticated form of relativism."¹⁶ In facing an alien society, says Winch, the social scientist must become a participant in a language game different from his own, and his "reflective understanding must necessarily presuppose, if it is to count as genuine understanding at all, the participant's unreflective understanding."¹⁷ That is to say, the sociologist or anthropologist must suspend his or her own views and must think, feel, and act like a native of the alien society in order to understand it "unreflectively," from the native's point of view.

It is not at all clear, however, how anyone can achieve "unreflective understanding" in thinking about a different culture. If "unreflective" means completely assimilated and internalized to the point of being unaware of the very rules of the language game, one may wonder how anyone can enter and participate in a different game in the first place. It would be nearly as impossible as knowing fish's happiness as a fish does. The desire to escape from one's own prejudice and to assume an alien point of view, as Bernstein notes, simply reenacts "a parallel move in nineteenth-century hermeneutics and historiography, where it was thought that we can somehow jump out of our skins, concepts, and prejudices and grasp or know the phenomenon as it is in itself."¹⁸ Georgia Warnke also sees a connection between Winch and romantic hermeneutics. "Does Winch suppose, as Dilthey does," Warnke asks, "that social scientists can simply leave their native languages behind them in learning a new one? Or, as in Gadamer's hermeneutics, are the two languages or sets of prejudices brought into relationship with one another and, if so, how?"¹⁹ These are of course crucial hermeneutical questions that Winch's argument prompts us to consider, questions that are particularly relevant to the concept of cross-cultural understanding. It is perhaps

15. Ibid., p. 11.

16. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, p. 27.

17. Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*, p. 89.

18. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, p. 104.

19. Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, p. 110.

to this relevance that Gerald Bruns alluded when he characterized Winch's works as "deeply involved with the subject of hermeneutics, that is, with its *Sache*—what hermeneutics is *about*."²⁰ Winch constantly calls our attention to the differences between cultures and languages, but the important hermeneutical question is: How does one achieve understanding beyond and in spite of those differences? His advice to assume a participant's "unreflective understanding," however, does not seem to offer a particularly helpful answer.

In his discussion of understanding alien societies, Winch is "mainly, though not exclusively, concerned about the nature of one man's understanding, in moral terms, of the lives and actions of *others*."²¹ In his controversial "Understanding a Primitive Society," he explicitly states that he is trying "to suggest that the concept of *learning from* which is involved in the study of other cultures is closely linked with the concept of *wisdom*."²² Here questions of hermeneutics become ethical questions as well, as one tries to understand an alien society in order to learn something from it, to expand one's vision, to get rid of one's ethnocentric prejudices, and to acquire moral knowledge about both the self and others. But understanding an alien society already presupposes a certain shared humanity rather than the insistence on difference, and adequate understanding does not entail abandoning one's own cultural values in order to become totally "unreflective" in one's own thinking. Understanding proves to be essential for the project of *Bildung* or self-cultivation, but such learning and self-cultivation can neither be a projection of the self onto the Other nor a complete self-effacement to become the Other: it can only be a moment of mutual illumination and enrichment in what Gadamer calls the fusion of horizons. And that, as I have argued elsewhere, is the only way to learn from different cultures and societies.²³

The openness to the challenge of others and the fusion of horizons will establish understanding and moral knowledge beyond skepticism and relativism without claiming absolute truth. In fact, it is often the cultural relativist that shows "a deep attachment to metaphysical realism itself," because the relativist argument usually proceeds in a specious line of All-or-Nothing: "First, an impossible demand is made, say, for unmediated

20. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, p. 8.

21. Winch, *Ethics and Action*, p. 2.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

23. See Zhang Longxi, "The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Autumn 1988): 108–31. An expanded version appears as chapter 1 of my book, *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China*.

presentness to reality as it is in itself or for an actual universal agreement about matters of value. Next, it is claimed that this demand cannot be met. Then, without any further ado," as Martha Nussbaum shows in a cogent analysis, the relativist "concludes that everything is up for grabs and there are no norms to give us guidance in matters of evaluation."²⁴ What Nussbaum proposes as an alternative, or what she calls Aristotelian essentialism, is a list of basic human functioning capabilities that constitute the basis of a notion of goodness in human life without pretending to be either absolute or exhaustively universal. That is also essentially Bernstein's point in arguing for the necessity to break away from the dichotomy of either/or thinking and to move beyond objectivism and relativism.

Insofar as ethics is concerned, one may wonder whether the recognition of cultural difference and its corollary, the relativist attitude, are necessarily tied to a morally superior position whereby one becomes a better person who is more sympathetic to others and has a greater respect for cultural heterogeneity. Conversely, one may wonder whether beliefs in any type of universal rights and values are necessarily related to ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism? If we go back to my earlier suggestion that Zhuangzi seems to resemble the universalist in assuming the possibility of common knowledge beyond fundamental differences, his universalism certainly has nothing to do with the universalism tainted by Western colonialism or imperialism, since Zhuangzi's argument for the commonality of knowledge is based on an egalitarian rather than a supremacist point of view. Indeed, from the perspective informed by Zhuangzi's insights, I will argue that the belief in the possibility of common knowledge and cross-cultural understanding, in the availability of conceptual tools for the interpretation of human behavior across the boundaries of language, geography, culture, and time, can indeed come from a genuine appreciation of the *equal capabilities* of different individuals, peoples, and nations. In other words, a universalist position, like the one grounded in the belief—like Zhuangzi's—in the fundamental equality of things, is not tied to colonialism or ethnocentrism. On the other hand, it is entirely possible and perfectly logical for cultural supremacists to take a relativist position in order precisely to emphasize cultural difference and to insist on the superiority and correctness of their own values over those of others.

We can find an illuminating example in the so-called Chinese rites controversy which marked an early cultural conflict between the East and the

24. Nussbaum, "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism," *Political Theory* 20 (May 1992): 213, 209.

West in the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth, and in which the Catholic Church, its popes and missionaries, the monarchs of Europe, the emperors of China, as well as some leading philosophers of the time, notably Voltaire and Leibniz, were all involved. The rites controversy, as George Minamiki reminds us, has two related aspects. One concerns “the problem of how Western man was to translate into the Chinese language the concepts of the divinity and other spiritual realities” (i.e., the issue of terminology), while the other concerns the problem of “how he was to judge, on a moral basis, the ceremonies performed by the Chinese in honor of Confucius and their ancestors” (i.e., the issue of rites proper). What the controversy exposes are problems in “the whole field of cross-cultural understanding and missionary accommodation.”²⁵

Insofar as the terminology issue was concerned, the debate arose among the missionaries from a profound difference in opinion with regard to the nature of Chinese language and thinking. Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), the famous Jesuit missionary and head of the China mission, learned the Chinese language and spread the idea that there were “traces of Christianity” in Chinese culture and customs, including “evidences of the cross among the Chinese.”²⁶ He found in ancient Chinese writing the ideas of *tian* (Heaven), *zhu* (Lord), and *shangdi* (Lord on High), and made use of these terms to translate the Christian God. Of the word *tianzhu* (Lord of Heaven) for translating God, Ricci says that the missionaries “could hardly have chosen a more appropriate expression.”²⁷ Obviously he had no doubt about the possibility of translating concepts and terms of Christianity into Chinese, and in *Tianzhu shiyi* [The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven], his treatise on the Christian doctrine written in Chinese and published in 1604, Ricci tried to present Western religious content in a Chinese garb as elegant as possible. The book “consisted entirely of arguments drawn from the natural light of reason, rather than such as are based upon the authority of Holy Scripture,” and it “contained citations serving its purpose and taken from the ancient Chinese writers; passages which were not merely ornamental, but served to promote the acceptance of this work by the inquiring readers of other Chinese books.”²⁸ Here we see Ricci playing the language game according to its rules, but he is by no means unreflective in using an alien language to serve his own purpose, for he does so in order to

25. Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy*, p. ix. For a recent study of the Rites Controversy that includes detailed discussion of many Chinese documents, see Li Tiangang, *Zhongguo liyi zhi zheng*.

26. Ricci, *The Journals of Matthew Ricci*, pp. 110, 111.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 448.

win over some high officials at the court of the Chinese emperor and to work toward the eventual Christian conversion of China.

"Ricci's plan for the conversion of the Chinese," as Haun Saussy comments, "involved appropriating the language of the canonical books and official Confucianism to give Catholicism the vocabulary, and incidentally the prestige, it lacked. Converting the Chinese required, as a first step, converting the Classics."²⁹ For that conversion, linguistic and cultural differences were not of primary interest except as obstacles to be overcome, for Ricci was much more intent on seeing the Chinese as potential fellow Christians and the Chinese language and culture as somehow compatible with the Christian doctrine. His strategy to appropriate the Chinese classics is to argue that they contain the divine revelation of natural religion, which had prepared the Chinese to receive the light of revealed religion.³⁰ In reading the Confucian classics as compatible with Christianity, the Jesuit Fathers gave the Chinese canonical texts a typological interpretation that separated them from their native context and presented them as shadows and prefigurations of the spiritual reality of Christ and his teachings. Lionel Jensen argues that "Confucius" is not a simple translation of the name of the great Chinese philosopher but a Jesuit invention, "a spiritual confrere who alone among the Chinese had preached an ancient gospel of monotheism now forgotten." Such appropriation of Confucianism and the Chinese classics enabled the missionaries to overcome the cultural strangeness they encountered in late Ming China and, more significantly, "to represent themselves to the natives as the orthodox bearers of the native Chinese tradition, *ru*."³¹

Filtered through Jesuit interpretation, Confucian moral and political philosophy had a notable impact on the European imagination, and the idea that the Chinese had achieved perfection in natural religion became especially appealing to many philosophers. By the end of the seventeenth century, as Arthur Lovejoy remarks, "it had come to be widely accepted that the Chinese—by the light of nature alone—had surpassed Christian Europe both in the art of government and in ethics."³² In his enthusiastic

29. Saussy, *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic*, p. 36.

30. This view is well reflected in Nicola Trigault's "To the Reader," written in 1615 when he translated Ricci's diary from Italian into Latin and published it in Rome. If he could go back to China and have enough time, says Trigault, he would write about the Chinese and compose "the Code of Chinese Ethics, so that one may understand how well adapted is the spirit of this people for the reception of the Christian faith, seeing that they argue so aptly on questions of morality." Ricci, *The Journals of Matthew Ricci*, p. xv.

31. Jensen, "The Invention of 'Confucius' and His Chinese Other, 'Kong Fuzi,'" *Positions* 1 (Fall 1993): 415. The argument is fully developed in Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*.

32. Lovejoy, "The Chinese Origin of a Romanticism," in *Essays in the History of Ideas*, p. 105.

desire for Europe and China to learn from each other, Leibniz held that “it would appear almost necessary that Chinese missionaries should be sent to us to teach us the use and practice of natural religion (*theologia naturalis*), just as we send missionaries to them to teach them revealed religion.”³³ Voltaire’s admiration of Confucius was boundless and, in the words of Adolf Reichwein, this Chinese philosopher “became the patron saint of eighteenth-century Enlightenment.”³⁴ Such widespread enthusiasm for a pagan culture, however, was bound to alarm the doctrinal purists in the Catholic Church. Ricci’s belief in a common understanding of the concept of the divinity, the idea of the true God shared by peoples in China and the West, soon became the target of severe criticism after his death; it was contested by his opponents as the focus in the rites controversy, and finally condemned in the official decrees issued by several popes from Clement XI in 1704 to Benedict XIV in 1742.

The cultural conflict between the East and the West came to a head in the rites controversy, in which the Catholic Church reasserted the spiritual exclusiveness of the Christian faith and the fundamental cultural difference between Christianity and pagan Chinese culture. Whether the Chinese and the Europeans could possibly have the same idea of God and other spiritual realities across linguistic and cultural differences can be recast as the basic question of translatability, and it is the doctrinal purist’s position in the Church that the Chinese language, being a language of matter and mundane concerns, cannot possibly express the spiritual concepts and values of Christianity. The use of the Chinese expression of *shangdi* (Sovereign on High) to mean God and the word *tian* to refer to Heaven were officially condemned by Clement XI in 1704 and again in 1715. Of course, the problem of terminology did not just bewilder the Catholic missionaries alone in their effort to convey Christian ideas in Chinese, for the Buddhist monks had encountered a similar problem earlier in history in translating their sutras from Sanskrit into Chinese, and the Protestant missionaries were again to face this question when they tried to put out their Chinese version of the Bible. The dilemma in translation, as Arthur F. Wright puts it, is a difficult and undesirable choice:

Select, as equivalents for key terms, native terms which already enjoyed great prestige, and in so doing risk the obliteration of the distinctive meaning of the original concept; or select as equivalents terms which, when used in an explained technical sense, more adequately translate the

33. Leibniz, *Novissima sinica* (1699), preface; quoted in Lovejoy, p. 106.

34. Reichwein, *China and Europe*, p. 77.