

THE CONTRIBUTION OF PROSPERO INTORCETTA TO THE *CONFUCIUS SINARUM PHILOSOPHUS*

Luisa M. Paternicò

The publication of the *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus sive Scientia Sinensis Latine Esposita*, in Paris in 1687, and its immediate success in the highest cultural circles of the XVII century, represented the apex of the syncretic effort between Confucianism and Catholicism started by Matteo Ricci more than one century before. The book also gave a great contribution in supporting the Jesuit position in the “Chinese Rites Controversy” which would become a hot issue shortly after. However, and above all, it confirmed the importance of the flow of information about China, through the passionate work of the Jesuit missionaries, which the European scholars were welcoming with enthusiasm. The book was the result of a work carried out by a group of China Jesuits who, following Ricci’s steps, had recognized the importance of studying the Confucian thought and its Classics for all the missionaries, who, on their turn, would start learning Chinese language and understand Chinese culture through them.

In the compilation of the *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (CSP hereafter), a fundamental role was played by Philippe Couplet (1623-1693), who was the editor of the entire work, the author of the *Proemialis Declaratio* and of the *Tabula Chronologica Monarchiae Sinicae* placed at the end of the book.

The present study draws attention to the heart of the text, which is the translation of three of the four Confucian Classics: *The Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大学), *The Dialogues* (*Lunyu* 论语) and *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), where the contribution of another China missionary, the Jesuit Father Prospero Intorcetta (1625-1696), appears to be predominant. Prospero Intorcetta, long before the publication of the CSP, had attempted the translation of the Confucian classics and had to face the important issue of rendering several key concepts of Confucianism, many of which did not have a direct equivalent in the West, in Latin. This translation process, therefore, required not only an outstanding mastery of the Chinese language but also a deep knowledge of its culture. Like other Jesuits before him, Intorcetta had realized the importance of an equally based cultural exchange between China and the West, the need for mental openness, tolerance and flexibility in the process of conversing people who were very different but not culturally inferior. Giving value to his personality and work, the world of Sinology should pay its debt towards Father Intorcetta, since he has been left in the shade for centuries, while the success of the CSP was being uniquely attributed to Couplet. It is important, however, to admit that Intorcetta’s former translations would be less renowned if they had not been published in France, thanks to the efforts made by Couplet, and thanks to the support granted by the King Louis XIV.

This paper will firstly offer an updated biography of Prospero Intorcetta and his mission to Europe. Secondly, it will summarize the long process that led to the publication of the CSP, concentrating on the efforts made by Intorcetta to find a publisher in Europe. Finally, through a comparative analysis between the former translations and those

published in the *CSP*, this study will attempt to extrapolate and determine the contribution of Intorcetta, focusing especially on the way some key concepts of the Confucian philosophy and of the traditional Chinese thinking in general were rendered.