

BOOK REVIEW:

The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (T'ien-chu Shih-i)

by Matteo Ricci, S.J. Translated, with Introduction and Notes by Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen, S.J. A Chinese-English Edition edited by Edward J. Malatesta, S.J. Published by The Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis 1985 In cooperation with the Ricci Institute, Taipei, Taiwan., 485 pp.

This is the first translation into English of the entire text of Matteo Ricci's Chinese classic The Meaning of the Lord of Heaven. The original dates back to 1603 and was published in Peking. Ricci's purpose was to introduce to the literati of the Imperial Court during the declining years of the Ming Dynasty fundamental ideas of the Judaic-Christian tradition. Writing in classical Chinese, he also adopts the dialogue form so traditional with China's classical philosophers as he seeks to explain to his Chinese friends such concepts as the purpose of life, human nature and the existence of God from a Western point of view. The present translation includes not only the original Chinese text along with Ricci's introduction, but also Ricci's summary of his work in the Latin language. Furthermore, there is a translators' introduction to the life and times of Ricci that is most helpful, and a concluding bibliography of primary and secondary sources, which is very useful for the lay-reader as well as for Sinophiles.

It is not an easy task to translate a classical Chinese text into modern English, especially if one wants to preserve the literal meaning of the original text while at the same time rendering a flowing readable English version.

One can argue over those areas where literal meaning has been sacrificed for fluency and clarity, while still commending the whole as a faithful and authentic translation. For instance, on p. 121 the translation reads: "He (the Lord of Heaven) is not, however, the same as the carved image of the Taoist Jade Emperor who is described as the Supreme Lord of the Black Pavilions of Heaven." The underlined part of the sentence is not to be found in the original and should therefore be put in a footnote or between brackets. One can also argue about some problematic translations of terms or grammatical particles. On page 107, for instance, 無極 (wu chi) is translated as "Ultimateless". However, Professor Wing-tsit Chan proposes the phrase the "Ultimate of Nonbeing". Actually the translators might have benefited from the advice of the noted Ming dynasty scholar Professor Wing-tsit Chan of Columbia University (mentioned in the translators' preface) who has evaluated the various forms for translating Chinese philosophical terms in Reflections on Things at Hand, the Neo-Confucian anthology compiled by Chu Hsi and Lu Tsu-ch'ien (New York, 1967).

The character 草 (ts'ao) is often translated as grass (Is its translation as "grain" on p. 247 a misprint?) But, ts'ao in classical Chinese also includes flowers and other plants. The translation of 所以 (suo-yi) as "therefore" on p. 59 and in some other cases is to my knowledge only the meaning it later received in modern Chinese, but in classical Chinese it means either "that by which" or "the reason why". It was not (emperor) Yao who controlled the floods (p. 437, para. 563), but the great Yü. Probably it is a misprint here, because on p. 441 the translation has Yü as the one who was away from home for eight years in order to control the floods.

However, all of this should not detract from the good work done by our translators and is merely offered as an indication that editing future editions can further improve upon the present good translation.

The English translation of The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven is a valuable contribution to the literature of Sino-European relations during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. The main difficulty faced by a twentieth

century scholar in this field of study is the necessity for him to put himself into the shoes of a seventeenth century Chinese scholar who, with his classical Neo-Confucian educational background, sought to analyse the Western-Christian thought of that time. An immense task. In recent years, we are indeed fortunate to have the works of the Neo-Confucian schools of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries translated into English by Professor Wing-tsit Chan. The studies of J. Gernet, Jonathan Spence, and John D. Young have also done much to broaden and deepen our understanding of that period. We can also look forward to Nicolas Standaert's soon to be published dissertation Confucian and Christian in Late Ming China, the Life and Thought of Yang Tingyun (1562-1627), which will be translated into Chinese by the Holy Spirit Study Centre, and will throw further light on the issues of the period. The works of the above mentioned scholars can be found in the bibliography section of this translation. This was a crucial period in East-West relations, marking a beginning of patterns that continue to effect those relationships down to our present day.

This translation of Ricci's initial encounter of East and West is not only a welcome addition to the literature of this period, but also vital to its understanding.

(Reviewed by Patrick Taveirne)

Ed. Note: Copies of The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven may also be obtained by writing to the Holy Spirit Study Centre, or The Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History, The University of San Francisco, San Francisco, California 94117, U.S.A. Price U.S.\$34.00