

10/2010

A hard translation for God's name



In this work, Prof. Sean Golden studies the debate on the possibility of accurate translations into Chinese of classic concepts from Catholic theology, which began in the 17th century as a result of missionary efforts conducted in China. The debate focuses on two opposing views, those of the two Jesuits Matteo Ricci and Niccolò Longobardi, who questioned whether there exist cultural equivalents which allow faithful translations between radically different cultures.

In the early 17th century, two Jesuits reached opposite conclusions about the feasibility of "domesticating" or "foreignizing" key theological terms and concepts in classical Chinese. Matteo Ricci proposed cultural equivalents that would allow the use of Chinese terms to translate key Catholic concepts on the basis of his own reading and interpretation of the Confucian canon. Niccolò Longobardi consulted contemporary Chinese scholars in order to understand the orthodox native interpretation of that canon. When he discovered that Neo-Confucian cosmology did not recognize the separation of matter and spirit, he decided that cultural equivalents did not exist, and insisted on transliterating key Catholic terms.

The disagreement between Ricci and Longobardi constitutes an early modern laboratory situation for testing approaches to cross-cultural transfer and developing a theoretical model for comparative cultural studies. This model -combining aspects of Karl Popper's Three World conjecture, Hans Georg Gadamer's metaphor of a cultural horizon, the concept of a hermeneutic circle initiated by Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Sinological considerations- offers a framework through which to analyze the contrasting approaches and conclusions of Ricci and Longobardi in the contexts of ethnocentrism and of linguistic-cultural relativism.

Sean Golden

sean.golden@uab.cat

References

"'God's Real Name is God' The Matteo Ricci-Niccolo Longobardi Debate on Theological Terminology as a Case Study in Intersemiotic Sophistication". Golden, Sean. *The Translator*: Volume 15, Number 2, 2009: Special Issue. *Chinese Discourses on Translation*, 375-400.

[View low-bandwidth version](#)