

The Unalterable Mean: Some Observations on the Presentation and Interpretation of *Zhongyong* of François Noël, SJ

Wong Ching Him Felix
The University of Hong Kong

Introduction

In common with *Daxue* 大學, *Zhongyong* 中庸 proves to be the most important Confucian classic that attracted the attention of seventeenth-century Jesuits in their translation projects.¹ The first Latin rendering was provided by Prospero Intorcetta (1626–1696) with the title *Sinarum Scientia Politico-Moralis* (*Chinese Political and Moral Science*), the first part being printed in Guangzhou in 1667 and the latter in Goa in 1669. This translation was later incorporated into the second volume of the influential *Relations de divers voyages curieux* (*Accounts of Various Curious Trips*) of the French diplomat Melchisédech Thévenot (1620–1692), and was further expanded in *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (*Chinese Philosopher Confucius*) chiefly edited by Philippe Couplet (1622–1693).² The latter work represents the spectacular success

¹ I principally base my English translation of *Zhongyong zhangju* 中庸章句 on the version provided by Johnston and Wang throughout this paper, with occasional slight modifications according to the context and my personal judgement. See Ian Johnston and Wang Ping, trans. & annot., *Daxue and Zhongyong* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2012).

² For a brief discussion of translations of *Zhongyong* in *Sinarum Scientia Politico-Moralis* and *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, see Luo Ying 羅瑩, “Yin Duoze Xiyi Zhongyong xiaoyi” 殷鐸澤西譯《中庸》小議, in *Guoji Hanxue* 國際漢學, ed. Zhang Xiping 張西平, vol. 20 (Zhengzhou: Daxiang chubanshe, 2012), pp. 149–55; idem, “‘Dao’ ke dao, fei chang dao: Zaoqi ruxue gainian Xiyi chutan” 「道」可道，非常道——早期儒學概念西譯初探, *Dongwu xueshu*, 2010, no. 2, pp. 135–39. For the relation of *Zhongyong* and Western spirituality among the Jesuits, see Mei Qianli 梅謙立 (Thierry Meynard), “Cong Xifang lingxiuxue de jiaodu

(Continued on next page)

of the missionary works of the Jesuits in the Oriental World, which in turn initiated a great fervour of Orientalism across the European continent and contributed to the birth of the abundance of ideas during the Age of Enlightenment.³ The translation of *Zhongyong* by the Belgian Jesuit François Noël (1651–1729) included in his *Sinensis Imperii Libri Classici Sex* (*The Six Classical Books of Imperial China*, henceforth *Libri Sex*) in 1711 presents a differing attempt to interpret this classic, and provides an alternate approach that could have rivalled *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, notwithstanding the fact that historical factors have robbed the work of considerable worth.