Introduction

Yili Xixue, or Western Learning on Ethics and Politics, was composed by Alfonso Vagnone (1566-1640) and a group of Chinese literati in Jiangzhou, Shanxi, during the years 1637-1640. The three major works which are included in it are entitled Xiushen Xixue, or Western Learning on Personal Cultivation, Qijia Xixue, or Western Learning on Household Management, and Zhiping Xixue, or Western Learning on Politics, corresponding to the four mu (categories) of the Daxue (Great Learning): Xiushen, Qijia, Zhiguo, and Pingtianxia, and also to the principal topics of Neo-Confucianism. In the Western tradition, these topics belong to the scientia moralis of philosophia, in contrast to scientia naturalis. According to Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274)’s interpretation of Aristotle’s works, the scientia moralis can be divided into three parts: ethica monastica, ethica oeconomica, or familiaris, and ethica politica. These were exactly the topics of Yili Xixue that has been translated into Chinese by Vagnone, combining Zhiguo and Pingtianxia as one western theme—ethica politica.

Historical Approach

Jiangzhou, the production site of Yili Xixue, 1637-1640

The connections of the translation group with others (Jesuits and literati) between Jiangzhou and other sites such as Beijing, Fuzhou, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, and Rome.

Jiangzhou, the starting point of the circulation of Yili Xixue, 1640-now

1 Han Lin’s Duoshu (Book of Caution, 1640) composed in Jiangzhou borrowed a lot from Yili Xixue.
2 Xiushen Xixue used to circulate in 18th century in Korea.
3 Zhiping Xixue might have influenced Wang Fuzhi’s political works composed in Hunan province in early Qing.
4 Some parts of Yili Xixue were reprinted during 1930s in Beijing.

Philosophical Approach

1 Investigations on the change of meaning (geyi) during translation such as ren and yi.
2 Comparative studies on some ‘thick ethical conceptions’ such as yong.
3 Comparative studies of different ethical works on the same topics such as Tongyou Jiaoyu (On Child Education) and Xiaoxue Jizhu (Commentaries on Minor Learning) on child education.

Western learning traveling along with the voyage of Vagnone from Europe to China.

The translation works were sent back to Europe after they were completed and have slept in the archives for centuries until they were reprinted and studied lately.