THE FIRST TREATISE ON THE SOUL IN CHINA
AND ITS SOURCES

An examination of the Spanish edition of the Lingyan lishao by Duceux

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Abstract: In 1624, the Italian Jesuit Francesco Sambiasi and the Chinese scholar-officer Xu Guangqi produced the Lingyan lishao [Humble Attempt at Discussing Matters Pertaining to the Soul]. My study serves as a supplement to the recent edition of the text by Isabelle Duceux, by showing how the Lingyan lishao takes its roots in the Coimbra De Anima commentary (1598). I show also that, in the process of transmitting the Western discourse of the soul to Chinese culture, the traditional boundaries between theology and philosophy were reshaped.

Key-words: Aristotelianism, De Anima, Jesuit Philosophy, China, F. Sambiasi.

Resumo: Em 1624 o Jesuíta italiano Francesco Sambiasi e o erudito e funcionário chinês Xu Guangqi publicaram Lingyan lishao [Humilde Ensaio de Discussão de Assuntos Relacionados com a Alma]. O presente estudo pretende ser um suplemento à recente edição do mesmo texto por Isabelle Duceux, demostrando que o Lingyan lishao se funda no Comentário ao De Anima de Coimbra (1598). Fica também demonstrado que, neste processo de transmissão do discurso ocidental sobre a alma para a cultura chinesa, se deu uma nova configuração às fronteiras entre teologia e filosofia.

Palavras-chave: Aristotelismo, De Anima, Filosofia na Companhia de Jesus, China, F. Sambiasi.

* Professor at Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou. I would like to thank Professor Mário Carvalho, Coimbra University, for giving me important bibliographical references. Professor Vicent Shen Qingsong, Toronto University, provided also some useful comments on Aristotelian philosophy. Isabelle Duceux reacted also to my evaluation of her work, clarifying that she did not have access to the Coimbra commentaries while writing her study. Huang Zhipeng, PhD student at Sun Yat-sen University, did the proofreading of the Chinese quotes. Finally, Francis Nguyen S.J. polished the English.
Introduction

Chinese Christian texts of the Late Ming and Early Qing present a major difficulty concerning the sources being used. In 1935, the French Vincentian priest Hubert Verhaeren compared some Late Ming-Early Qing writings with the Coimbra Aristotelian commentaries written by the Jesuits, and he discovered that four works were “renditions,” as distinguished from translations, of the Coimbra commentaries. Among those four works, the first one is the Lingyan lishao 灵言蠡勺, taught orally (koushou 口授) by Bi Fangji 畢方濟 (Francesco Sambiasi, 1582-1649) and transcribed (bílu 笔录) by Xu Guangqi 徐光啟 (1562-1633). The preface is dated the seventh month of the first year of the reign of emperor Tianqi 天啓, which corresponds to the period between August 14th and September 12nd, 1624. According to Verhaeren, the work takes its source in the Coimbra commentary on De Anima, written in the second half of the 1580s by the Portuguese Jesuit Manuel de Gois (1547-1597), but published posthumously in 1598, some twenty-five years before our Chinese text.\(^1\) This work constitutes the first appearance of a treatise in China dedicated entirely to the question of the soul, a question as central to Western thought as the question of God.\(^2\)

In comparing the Chinese text with the Latin text, Verhaeren encountered two main difficulties. First, the second juan, or fascicle, of the Lingyan lishao does not deal with philosophy, but rather contains two “homilies,” one on the similarities of the human soul to God, and the other on the Supreme Good of the soul, that is, God. Also, concerning the first juan, Verhaeren recognized the difficulty of putting in parallel the lengthy Coimbra commentary with the much shorter Lingyan lishao. However, he explained this difficulty by mentioning at the end of the Chinese text: “grasping one and leaving out ten thousand” (guiyi louwan 挂一漏万), and thus he considered the Lingyan lishao as a synopsis. He established the dependence of the work on the Latin commentary based on three grounds, which are not fully developed. First, the introduction of the Chinese text is a close translation of the first paragraph of the introduction (proemium) of the Coimbra commentary; second, the...

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\(^2\) Giulio Alieni had worked on the same years on a treatise on the soul, perhaps without mutual knowledge, since Aleni was based in Fujian province and Sambiasi in Shanghai. The Xingxue Cushi (General Introduction to the Learning on Human Nature) was translated and composed (yizhu) by Aleni around 1624, but was published only in 1646, some three years before his death.

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structures of the two works are similar; third, the section on the intellect
(lunmingwuzhe 論明悟者) describing the production of four images in the
cognitive process translates closely the text of Coimbra.\(^3\) Unfortunately,
Verhaeren’s pioneer research did not go further.

More recently, Isabelle Duceux produced an outstanding Chinese-
Spanish bilingual edition of the Lingyan lishao. In it, she challenged
Verhaeren’s view, stating “it is very unlikely that the Lingyan lishao is
simply an adaptation of the Coimbra commentary on the soul.”\(^4\) Besides
the two difficulties mentioned by Verhaeren himself; Duceux raised another
difficulty. There are many comments in the Lingyan lishao that touch on
theological questions, with parallels in the Summa theologica, and do not
come from a philosophical commentary on the De Anima, either the one by
Aquinas or by the Coimbra Jesuits.

Neither Verhaeren nor Duceux have made a thorough comparison
between the Lingyan lishao and the Coimbra commentary. Indeed, it is an
arduous task to search into this lengthy Latin commentary for parallels with
the Chinese text. Without pretending to be exhaustive, I spent some time
investigating the matter in a more systematic way. The question is complex
since many passages of the Coimbra commentary refers to the Summa
theologica. Therefore, it is necessary to look for a specific interpretation
of the Coimbra commentary, also present in the Lingyan lishao. This is not a
pure philological question, but points to other important questions. How the
Jesuits envisioned the relationship between philosophy and theology? How
the Coimbra commentary may be innovative in rearticulating the traditional
boundaries of philosophy and theology? How the Jesuits communicated
their vision to China?

Structure of the Lingyan lishao and its preface

The structure of the Lingyan lishao is quite straightforward. In the first
juan, after a general introduction (yìn 引), the text deals with the question

\(^3\) LYLS (Lingyan lishao), Xu Guangqi quanji 徐光啟全集, edited by Zhu Weizheng
朱維錚 and Li Tiangang 李天綱, (Shanghai : Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), vol. 3,
399 : 緣是格物之家分物象為四等… . It exists another punctuated edition: Mingqingzhijì
xixuewenben 明清之際西學文本, edited by Huang Xingtao 黃興濤 (Beijing : Zhonghua
shuju, 2013), 317-353. In both modern editions, the Chinese text is based on the Tianxue
chuhan (1629) realized by Li Zhizao. Parallel in the Commentary of De Anima (Coimbra,
1598), Liber 3, c. 5, q. 3, a. 2, 335: “Porro quibisdam veluti gradibus ascendunt species,
quae cognitionis principia existent...”

\(^4\) Isabelle Duceux, La introducción del aristotelismo en China à través del De Anima,
Siglos XVI-XVII (México : El Collegio de México, 2009), 36.
of the soul as substance (ti 體), then with the vegetative and sensitive souls (shengneng jueneng 生能覺能). After a general discussion on the intellective soul, its three powers are presented: memory (jihan 記含), intellect (mingwu 明悟) and will (aiyu 愛欲). The second juan discusses on the dignity of the soul as being in the likeness of God, and then discusses on the attributes of God.

Verhaeren had already noted the sharp contrast between the two juan, praising the first juan as a work of philosophy, but discarding the second juan as mere “homilies” filled with oratory repetitions. Unlike Verhaeren, Duceux considered the second juan as an elaborated work of theology, and interestingly she divided the work in three parts. The first part deals with the definition of the soul; the second part, about the cognitive dimensions of the soul, deals with the vegetative and sensitive souls, and with memory and intellect; the third part, theological, discusses the will at the end of the first juan and the union of the soul with God in the second juan.

I shall re-examine the structure of the work, but let us turn first to the preface. As expected, it gives the reasons for the importance of the study of the soul. First, the study of the soul allows the “knowledge of the self” (renji 認己), as it is “inscribed on the fronton of a great school in ancient times.” This echoes the sentence written on the Temple of Delphi, as mentioned by the Coimbra commentary, which explains further: “No one can know himself without considering the nature and dignity of his soul.” This Socratic reference in an Aristotelian commentary is quite surprising. However, as Mário Carvalho explains, this theme is characteristic of the Renaissance, which places human being as the center of the universe, in whose spirit the unity between knowledge and truth is realized.

The second reason for the importance of studying the soul is that, by knowing the faculties of the soul and its beauty, human beings understand the moral principles (li 理) in order to conduct their lives and manage others, especially on how to moderate and control feelings “according to the moral principles” (congli 從理). The Coimbra commentary indeed mentions the ethical application of the study of the soul: “Reason holds the highest control of the soul so that it subjects to itself the concupiscible and irascible powers.” The Chinese text refers also to the Aristotelian notion of the science of the

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5 Coimbra, Proemium, 1: “Sententia foribus templi Delphici: … nosse autem se nemo potest, nisi animi sui naturam et dignitatem perspectam habeat.”

6 In the Jesuit commentary Carvalho sees the beginnings of a new science, later called psychology, establishing a true science of the soul and a foundation for philosophy and morality. See Mário Santiago Carvalho, “Imaginação, pensamento e conhecimento de si,” Revista Filosófica de Coimbra 37 (2010): 26-27.

7 Coimbra, Proemium, 1: “Ratio summam animae arcem teneat, ut inde appetendi & irascendi vim sibi subjiciat.”