



Universalitas & Pervasivitas

il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)
di A. Pisani

Schede autori Attività missionaria

Philippe Couplet



Philippe Couplet, also Philip Couplet or Philippus Couplet (1623 – 1693), was a Belgian Jesuit Father who was active in China in the 17th century. He was born in Mechelen, Spanish Netherlands (now Belgium).[1]

Career

Chinese career (1656–1681)

Philippe Couplet entered the Jesuit Order in 1640. His interest in China was aroused by a lecture by [Martino Martini](#), a former Jesuit missionary to China.[1]

Couplet initially left for China in 1656, in a group of new Jesuit recruits led by [Michal Boym](#), who was returning to China with the Pope's response to the Southern Ming's Yongli Emperor plea for help.[2] Couplet took various responsibilities throughout China, but had to take refuge in Canton during the 1665-1670 persecutions.[1]

Couplet worked closely with Candida Xu (Chinese: Xu Gandidi) (1607–1680), a granddaughter of Xu Guangqi and a devout Christian herself. Under her patronage, he was able to set a number of new churches throughout Jiangnan.[2]

Mission to Europe (1681–1693)

Couplet was sent back to Europe in 1681 as Procurator of the China Jesuits in Rome. His mission was to obtain papal agreement for the liturgy to be sung in Chinese.[1] On his visit to Rome he gave the Pope a library of Chinese translations of Christian books.[1] While in Europe, his visit to king Louis XIV triggered plans for the dispatch of five Jesuit "mathematicians" to the Chinese Court.[1]

Philippe Couplet brought with him one of the first known Chinese men to visit Europe: [Michael Shen Fu-Tsung](#). Upon his return to Europe in 1685 Couplet brought with him two Chinese converts, including Michael Shen Fu-Tsung, one of the first Chinese men known to visit Europe, who visited Italy, France and England.[3][4] Soon after, Couplet and one of the converts answered questions about the nature of the Chinese language posed by linguists in Oxford, Berlin and Vienna.[3]



Publications

In 1686 Couplet published in Paris *Tabula chronologica monarchiae sinicae*, a "chronological table of the Chinese monarchy", in an attempt to show that there was agreement between the Septuagint and the Chinese chronological records.[3] To prove his point he had to add 1400 years to the time



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period that existed between Creation and the birth of Abraham.[3] This however did not satisfy the European intelligentsia or the missionaries in China.[3] His work nevertheless had a major impact in other areas of European science.[5] Leibniz, for example, was able to establish, after communicating with the Jesuits, that the binary system he had invented also existed in the Yijing.[5]

In 1687, leading a group of Jesuits (**Prospero Intorcetta**, **Christian Wolfgang Herdtrich**, and **François de Rougemont**), Couplet published *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* ("Confucius, Philosopher of the Chinese"), an annotated translation of three out of the Four Books from which the study of the Confucian canon traditionally started. The work (parts of which had appeared earlier in separate, little known, editions) was a culmination of the efforts of several generations of Jesuit missionaries,[6] and was dedicated to King Louis XIV.[7][3] The preface to the translation highly praised the works of Confucius:

"One might say that the moral system of this philosopher is infinitely sublime, but that it is at the same time simple, sensible and drawn from the purest sources of natural reason... Never has Reason, deprived of Divine Revelation, appeared so well developed nor with so much power." - Preface to *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*. [8]

Prior to returning to China he stayed in Europe until a dispute between the vicars apostolic of the Asian missions, to which he had taken an oath of obedience, and the Portuguese **padroado** system, his initial tutelary organization, was resolved.[1] After negotiations that lasted for eight years, the two sides were able to reach an agreement and Couplet finally departed for China.[1]

As Couplet was travelling back to China, a heavy chest fell on his head during a storm in the Arabian Sea, severely injuring the septuagenarian Jesuit. He died the next day, May 16, 1693, as his ship was about to reach Goa.[9]

Works

- *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus, sive scientia sinensis latine exposita ...* (1687), Paris, by Philippe Couplet and Prospero Intorcetta
- *Tabula Chronologica Monarchiae Sinicae* (1686)
- *Breve raguaglio delle cose piu notabili spettanti al grand'imperio della Cina* (1687)
- *Histoire d'une dame chrétienne de la Chine, Candide Hiu* (1688) (Biography of Candida Xu)

Notes

- ^{1 a b c d e f g h} Gerald H. Anderson, *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, p. 155
- ^{2 a b} Mungello, David E. (1989). *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology*. University of Hawaii Press. pp. 253–254. ISBN 0824812190. <http://books.google.com/books?id=wb4vPw4ZgZQC>.
- ^{3 a b c d e f} Lach, Donald F (1973). "China In Western Thought And Culture". in Wiener, Philip P. *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. ISBN 0684132931. <http://xtf.lib.virginia.edu/xtf/view?docId=DicHist/uvaBook/tei/DicHist1.xml;chunk.id=dv1-48>. Retrieved 2009-12-02.
- 4 Ballaster, p.262
- ^{5 a b} University of Barcelona website
- 6 Mungello 1989, p. 17, 253-258



BIBLIOTECA UNIVERSITARIA DI GENOVA – PERCORSI TEMATICI

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- 7 *The Dragon and the Eagle: The Presence of China in the American Enlightenment* - Page 17 by Alfred Owen Aldridge (1993)
8 Quoted in Hobson, p.194
9 Mungello, p. 257

References

- Anderson, Gerald H. (1999) *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, ISBN 0802846807 [2]
Ballaster, Rosalind (2005) *Fables of the East: Selected Tales 1662-1785*, Oxford University Press, ISBN 0199267340
Hobson, John M. (2004) *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*, Cambridge University Press, ISBN 0521547245
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L'opera sulla cronologia cinese di Couplet è contraddistinta da una grandissima prudenza rispetto all'audacia di p. Martini. Ciò non toglie, tuttavia, che egli e la sua opera siano stati abbondantemente sfruttati dal "partito" gesuitico parigino al fine di convincere il re a favorire l'invio di missionari gesuiti esperti in matematica e astronomia in un paese come la Cina dove avrebbero potuto trarre i massimi vantaggi dalle loro ricerche.

Secondo Couplet gran parte delle differenze tra la cronologia cinese e quella cristiana è dovuta al fatto che i primi, privi dell'illuminazione della Bibbia, non avrebbero saputo correttamente interpretare eventi inseriti nella loro tradizione mitica che, a dire di Couplet, avrebbero puntualmente rispecchiato quelli tramandati dalla Bibbia, quali per esempio le modalità della creazione del mondo, il primo uomo e il Diluvio. Nonostante tutti i suoi tentativi di accomodamento, però, la cronologia di Couplet non riesce ad accordarsi con quella della *Vulgata* e l'inizio dell'epoca storica viene fissata circa trecento anni prima della data stimata per il Diluvio.

"Il gesuita Couplet, uno dei grandi edificatori del mito cinese in Europa e già in dimistichessa, a Parigi, col duca del Maine, cui erano legati anche i gesuiti condannati dalla Sorbona ♦, **Le Comte** e **Le Gobien**, aveva argomentato nella sua *Tabula chronologica monarchiae sinicae* (1686) [sia pure con motivazioni ben diverse da quelle del protestante **Georges Horn**, teologo e storico di Leida, che nella *Dissertatio de vera aetate mundi* (Leiden, 1659) aveva confutato le tesi di **Isacco Vossio**, laddove coincidevano col preadamitismo del **La Peyrère**], che la storia cinese dovesse essere interpretata come una omologazione della storia biblica, proprio anche in virtù della concezione dei gesuiti figuristi ♦♦ che avevano supposto una derivazione dal confucianesimo dalle antiche rivelazioni testamentarie dei profeti precristiani, diffuse in Asia dai Noetici... dopo il diluvio. Quanto al Couplet, egli era stato per l'appunto quel gesuita che aveva fornito informazioni e spunti al **Saint-Evremond** per i suoi giudizi, invero non troppo encomiastici, in merito alla Cina. Il barone Saint-Evremond, infatti, non si era peritato di deridere, proprio anche attraverso una lettera cursoria e del tutto personale e deformante delle opere del Couplet, le esaltanti espressioni che Isacco Vossio aveva usato a proposito della Cina in quel suo spigilegio dal titolo *Variarum observationum liber*,



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edito a Londra nel 1685, Vossio, l'erudito olandese, lui pure esule, che il libertino Saint-Evremond, in volontario esilio in Inghilterra, ben conosceva, avendolo potuto spesso incontrare (dopo averlo conosciuto primamente in Olanda) nei salotti londinesi, e in particolare in quello della duchessa **Ortensia Mancini**, nipote del **Mazarino**, di cui il Saint-Evremond fu abituale frequentatore.”

Cfr.: Sergio Zoli *Dall'Europa libertina all'Europa illuminista* Firenze: Nardini, 1997, p. 435-436.

Vedi anche: **[profilo biografico di Philippe Couplet nel sito dell'Enciclopedia Treccani](#)**