Jesuit Chreia in Late Ming China
Two Studies with an Annotated Translation of Alfonso Vagnone’s Illustrations of the Grand Dao

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Ming Jesuit Chreia in Chinese:  
An Analysis of Its Types and Functions

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Textuality

There is a scholarly consensus that the Jesuits of the Late Ming (1583–1662) played a major role in the transportation of European culture to China during that period.¹ Most of the students of Jesuit literature have also reached a somewhat more dubious agreement that the Chinese converts by the Jesuits at that time were, to borrow Jacques Gernet’s term, “seduced” by the excellence of European mathematics, cartography, astronomy, engineering, and medicine.² This traditional

¹ What I mean by the “Late Ming” includes the period generally known as the Southern Ming. My inclusion of it here is based on considerations not only of cultural continuation, but also of political realities. Not even the early Qing government denied the legitimacy of the Ming government in exile between the years 1644–1662. See He Guanbiao 何冠彪, “Qing Gaozong dui Nan-Ming lishi diwei de chuli 清高宗對南明歷史地位的處理,” Xinshixue 新史學 7/1 (March 1996): 2–25.

view, however, has recently been questioned in many ways because religious belief is spiritual by nature and material culture can hardly dominate the general, major part of its shaping. In addition, conversion is itself commonly the result of persuasion, which is also the ultimate goal of a view of rhetoric which Aristotle came up with in his *On Rhetoric.*\(^3\) If the missionary works concerned had to rely greatly on writing, the act of persuasion may in fact have been more strategic and therefore more rhetorical in nature. Their literariness, in fact, almost equals their religiosity if one agrees that rhetoricity is part of a work’s literariness. My investigation of the Ming Jesuit works in Chinese finds that they indeed are comprised of a large amount of material that can be properly qualified as literary, including dialogues, hagiography, poems, collections of maxims, fables, and anecdotes.\(^4\) Among these Jesuit works of seemingly apologetical nature, a special genre stands out, that of the *exemplum.*

An *exemplum* has been defined as “un récit bref donné comme véridique et destiné à être inséré dans un discours (en général un sermon) pour convaincre un auditoire par une leçon salutaire.”\(^5\) These

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stories not only had an intrinsic motive that all good tales have, and combined the appropriateness that all excellent analogies have, they also functioned as authorities. Taken from the settings and origins of European cautionary stories as a whole, they can be roughly divided into two categories: classical and Christian. In terms of the classical stories, fables and anecdotes are the two types of writing that functioned most as exemplum. In *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle accentuates the importance of proof as the basic tool of logical persuasion. One form that some of those proofs took was “made up” stories such as Aesopic fables. What constitutes the second species of Aristotle’s proofs are those events which “have happened before” (2.20.1). Here, Aristotle evidently means “examples from history.” He argues that they are “more useful in deliberation” because “future events will be like those of the past” (2.20.8). It is precisely this mirror theory which brought into being the second type of medieval exempla in the European tradition: the anecdote.

The call for a careful examination of anecdotal exempla in sermons was heard long ago. It would be a mistake, however, if one were to view the Jesuit anecdotal exempla in the Ming as being antithetical to their counterparts in fables. For the Jesuits, “examples from history” are barely distinguished from those by Aesop and his Roman and medieval successors. Matteo Ricci in his *Tianzhu shiyi* may have alluded to the well-known tale of Diogenes of Sinope looking for an honest man with a lighted lamp by day. This story, supposed by Diogenes Laertius to be biographical, was rewritten by Phaedrus (first century) as an Aesopic fable. In the process of rewrit-

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ing, even the name of Diogenes was changed into Aesop.⁹ Such a transformation shows that, even when one does not question the nature of a fable, one may feel reluctant to assign much historical credibility to an anecdote.

What prompts one to suspend belief in anecdotal reliability relates to a modern consensus about the nature of history, a consensus that, because of Lepold von Ranke’s (1795–1886) scientific view of history, prevailed especially in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first seventy years of the twentieth.¹⁰ To the Chinese as to most Europeans, history is so called because it constitutes an account of what has happened in the past that is able to be borne out by evidence. For this reason, discursive restrictions have been imposed both on massive works of national history and on tiny narratives of personal experience. For the Chinese, what Ban Gu 班固 (32–92) in his eulogy of the great historian of China, Sima Qian 司馬遷 (c. 145 BC–?), refers to as the “true record” (shilu 實錄) of the past is the first and foremost aim of historiographical practice. A good historian is thus required to depict a historical event without decoration or

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¹⁰ I am grateful to Dr. Huang Chin-hsing 黃進興 of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, for his help concerning von Ranke’s theory of history. For a detailed review of modern historicism, see Huang’s *Lishi zhuyi yu lishi lilun 歷史主義與歷史理論* (Taipei: Yunchen, 1992), 18–116.

camouflage. Ideas like this were not necessarily de rigueur in the historiography of European antiquity; such great historians as Thucydides (c. 460–c. 400 BC) and Livy (c. 59 BC–c. AD 17) sometimes so failed to distinguish history from rhetoric that history had come to be taken as a literary form before the end of the Renaissance. One must notice, however, that such writers employed imagination not for aesthetic purposes, but as a means to clear clouded memory or deformed information from the past. To “show what actually happened,” as von Ranke terms it, remained most desirable for historians like Thucydides, who once jeered at the baselessness of parts of Herodotus’s History. The emphasis on historical precision is reinforced by Herodotus’s use of ἱστορία in the very beginning of his work, a noun that aims at a pragmatic and positive action of inquiry or investigation. It takes little imagination to see that if classical historians could stand on the same temporal and research ground as modern historians, they would have relied much less on imagination.

In the West as in China, the anecdote is the most oxymoronic genre in historiography since, while aspiring to mirror the factual past, it can hardly escape things fictitious due to its focus on secret, private, or hitherto unpublished details of a person. In the whole spectrum of Jesuit anecdotal exempla drawn from the classical world in the West, chreia (Gk: χρεία), a type of moral anecdote, whose characteristics

I will discuss later, stands out as the most unrelenting challenge to historical truth. A genre close to that used by Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–444) in his Shishuo xinyu 世說新語 (New Accounts of the World), chreia finds its most representative expression in the story of Diogenes’s search for an honest man with a lighted lamp by day. As with Diogenes Laertius’s responding to this Aesopic “fable,” writers of chreia since classical antiquity have tended to historicize the stories themselves. Lucian (b. c. AD 120) provides a good example: in Demonax, he believes that his account of the philosopher Demonax’ chreia will suffice to give his reader a notion of the sort of man Demonax was. In other words, Lucian regarded his chreia as the “true records” of their protagonists. This is true not only of the Hellenic mind, but also of the Late Ming Jesuits. Manuel Dias (1574–1659), in his Shengjing zhijie 聖經直解, always introduces his chreia about Alexander the Great (Lishan 歷山) with the Chinese term “shiji 史記” or “as history puts it.” The last two characters in the title of Alfonso Vagnone’s DDJY, one of the first and hitherto the only two collections of Western chreia in the Chinese world, suggest a sense of historicity through their allusion to the well-known statement in Ban Gu’s Hanshu 漢書

18 R. O. P. Taylor argues in his The Groundwork of the Gospels (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), 87, that “the Chreia was, to the Hellenic mind, a fundamental form. We have to recollect, however, that it was not merely a literary form, but essentially a historical statement: So-and-so, who was a known, historical figure, actually said or did this.”
19 Yang Maruo 陽瑞諾 (Manuel Dias), Shengjing zhijie, in WXSB: 2: 657–754, 2702 and 2729.
20 The other one is Lixu guyen 勵學古言 also translated by Alfonso Vagnone. An original copy of this title is now kept in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, numbered R. G. Oriente III 223 (7). It can be found as well in FGT, 4: 1–66.
(History of the Han Dynasty) that “the Historian on the Left recorded words” (zuoshi jiyan 左史紀言; italics are mine).21

In addition to historians, chreia also caters to philosopher- orators. Demonax, for instance, always responded in chreic form to questions from his interlocutors, such that “his every word and deed was smiled on by the Graces and by Aphrodite,” and that “persuasion perched upon his lips.”22 Because chreia facilitates persuasion, it must have been cherished by classical rhetoricians. As can be expected, it had been one of the three component parts of the Greek or Latin progymnasmata since Greek antiquity.23 It even is seen by many scholars as having exercised great influence upon the composition of Jesus’s teachings in the Gospels.24

Inasmuch as chreia was the pearl of classical rhetoricians, it still carried within itself a strong literariness. Since it left clear traces even in the gospels, it was natural that the early Jesuit missionaries in China appropriated it for their own use: the activities of both Jesus and the Jesuits involved religious instruction. Part of what I mean by literariness is fictionality, which in turn depends on rhetoric for its effect. To borrow contemporary terminology, one may argue that the

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22 Lucian, 149.
23 The other two are the fable and the mythological narrative. For the use of chreia in Greek and Roman education, see R. A. Pack, The Greek and Latin Literary Texts from Greco-Roman Egypt, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1965), 2287; and Quintillian, Institutio oratoria, trans., H. E. Butler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 1.9.1–1.10.1. For modern references in this respect, see Stanley F. Bonner, Education in Ancient Rome (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 176 and 253.
fictionality in the Jesuit chreiai is embodied in a textuality which generally comes as the result of the Jesuit ability to utilize history. While linguistic play is a significant constituent of all textuality, in this case it results primarily from the play of a standard set of rhetorically preliminary exercises that were formulated in such classical texts as Aelius Theon of Alexandria’s (first century A.D.) *Progymnasmata*, designed to prepare the student of Greek composition for the incorporation of traditional stories and sayings into full-length speeches.\(^{25}\) Let me, nevertheless, begin my approach to this textuality in the Chinese chreiai of the Jesuits with Aphthonius of Antioch’s (fourth century A.D.) definition of chreia in his own *Progymnasmata*, the most widely used textbook of Latin composition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,\(^{26}\) the period in which the European Jesuits began journeying to Ming China.

**Grammar**

Ronald F. Hock regards that the following statement by Aphthonius as the most thoughtful description of chreia in his chrivic discourse: “A chreia is a concise reminiscence aptly attributed to some character.”

\(\text{Χρεία ἐστὶν ἀπομνημόνευμα σύντομον εὐστοχῶς ἐπὶ τί πρόσωπον}\)


\(^{26}\) Aphthonius wrote in Greek, but his text was Latinized in the sixteenth century. The English translation of the complete Greek text can be found in Ray Nadeau, “The *Progymnasmata* of Aphthonius,” *Speech Monographs* 19/4 (November 1952): 264–285. Aphthonius’s Greek chapter on chreia, together with its English translation, can be conveniently found in Ronald F. Hock and Edward N. O’Neil, eds., 224–234. I regret that I have not had access to the Latin translation of Aphthonius’s *Progymnasmata*. For the popularity of Aphthonius in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, see Francis R. Johnson, “Two Renaissance Textbooks of Rhetoric: Aphthonius’s *Progymnasmata* and Rainolde’s *A booke called the Foundation of Rhetorike*,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 6 (1943): 427–444. Rainolde’s manual is a free adaptation in English of Aphthonius.