
ALFONSO VAGNONE'S EDUCATIONAL PROJECT IN LATE
MING DYNASTY AND HIS *EDUCATION OF CHILDREN*
(*TONGYOU JIAOYU*)

明朝晚期高一志的教育项目以及他的
《童幼教育》

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ABSTRACT

With the foundation of the college of Messina in Sicily in 1548, the Society of Jesus began its direct involvement with education. In the last decade of the Ming dynasty, the Italian Jesuit Alfonso Vagnone (1566-1640) developed an educational project with the help of Chinese scholars. His project was not exclusively focused on Christian communities but concerned the whole of society and involved a broad array of issues. This paper will analyse the core objectives of his educational project and discuss its relevance today.

CONSTITUTION OF AN EDUCATIVE COMMUNITY

We tend to think of schools as implementing a curriculum using pedagogical rules defined by a central administration. However, an education for the common good in any particular context implies the involvement of the local communities affected. Indeed, when we look at the patterns of how the Jesuit colleges in Europe were founded, they usually corresponded to the requests of a local community which provided land, building and

financing, thus enabling the school to operate without charging tuitions; this model reflected the vision of Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), who desired such ministries to be provided free-of-charge.¹ This setup assumed the involvement of wealthy and powerful people, but each school also targeted their educational outreach to poor families, given no tuition was being charged.

In the last decades of the Ming dynasty, an intellectual, social and political movement started amongst the marginalised scholar-gentry

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class to bring about the moral reform of China through a largely conservative program focusing on ritualism and Classical learning (Chow, 1994, p. 43). The aim of the reformers was to revitalise the community compact, or *xiangyue* (鄉約). In such compacts, members would meet on a regular basis in a “recitation hall” to recite Taizu’s *Sacred Edicts* and perform rites reaffirming their community membership and loyalty to the dynasty. An important dimension of the *xiangyue* for our purposes is that they were in charge of the community schools.

Han Lin (1596-1649) and Han Yun (1600-1644), Han brothers from Jiangzhou, Shanxi province, came from an established family in Shanxi, which held official positions. The Han brothers’ father accumulated considerable wealth thanks to his business activities. However, the sons were not much interested in running the family business, but more concerned about the

moral decay of society at that time. Their quest for meaning thus led them to embrace Catholicism and strive for the moral revival of their generation. The fortune accumulated by their family would help in financing their religious, moral and political projects.

The Jesuits during this time were invited to go to Jiangzhou by the Han family. Vagnone was very effective in his direct evangelisation work. When he arrived in 1624, there were only 25 Catholics; when he died in 1640, there were 8,000, including 200 degree-holders (Pfister, 1932, p. 89). This made Jiangzhou one of the most important Catholic communities in terms of absolute numbers. Additionally, the city likely had the highest density of Catholics across all of China. A church was erected there in 1626, being the first church ever built in China with no contribution made by foreigners (Huang, 2006, p. 288). Vagnone, however, considered his most important, effective and lasting contribution to be the indirect evangelisation he achieved through his intellectual work (Margiotti, 1958, p. 270). He cherished the idea of collaborating with the non-Christian *literati* in an institutional way. The idea was to foster, in addition to communities of converts, a community of sympathising *literati* and officials. In one of his reports, he stated that “he could establish in this city a congregation exclusively composed of mandarins and relatives of the Han brothers” (Pfister, 1932, p. 91). In fact, the congregation mentioned by Vagnone was not something completely new, but followed the pattern of the *xiangyue*, mentioned above.

THE HIGHER GOOD OF GOD OR THE COMMON GOOD OF SOCIETY?

Vagnone was an educator. Before moving to China, he taught rhetoric in Milan (Pfister, 1932, p. 85). During his stay in China, he attempted to establish a curriculum which combined European and Chinese elements. He was quite prolific during his time in China, authoring, with the help of relevant *literati*, some 20 works. He translated, or better, rewrote four college manuals for teaching philosophy. Vagnone also published a few books on morality, including the *Tongyou*

¹ According to the Constitutions (Part IV, c. 7, n. 3), the Jesuit schools need to be founded with a stable source of revenues, which enable them to accept all students for free; see Ignatius of Loyola, Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms, translated by George E. Ganss, Saint Louis: Jesuit Sources, 1996.

jiaoyu (*Education of Children*, c. 1632), his first work published in Jiangzhou. These works were based on books that he had read and used in teaching in Italy or Macau.²

Jesuit colleges, from their founding, have offered a curriculum based on humanistic studies (Latin grammar, rhetoric, among others). Parents helped to start many Jesuit schools and sent their children there for this reason. However, among the first generation of Jesuits – e.g. Ignatius of Loyola or Jeronimo Nadal (1507-1580), rector of the first college of the Jesuits in Messina – their motivations were not humanistic *per se*. Nevertheless, they considered the profane subjects of the humanistic education as tools for a religious purpose, namely, the salvation of souls, which at the time meant fighting against Protestant “heresies” (Codina, 1968, p. 282). To put it bluntly, the educative role for the first generation of Jesuits was a purposeful means for mission.

It was only with the second generation of Jesuits, such as Juan Bonifacio (c.1538-1606), that the Jesuits fully embraced humanistic studies and recognised the training of youth for perfect eloquence as an end in itself (Kessler, 2014, p. 32).

Vagnone realised the importance of going beyond the nascent Catholic community of Jiangzhou to engage with the larger society and collaborate with non-Christians toward the common good. The *Tongyou jiaoyu* proposes moral values that are not exclusively Christian and its audience is not primarily Christian communities. Rather, its aim was to impact and dialogue with local communities of intellectuals and the common people of the community compact. It served to build community life around mutual values, such as humility, obedience to parents and superiors, and frugality, which shared resonance with Confucian values. While many Christians attended community compact meetings in Jiangzhou, the meetings always remained a public gathering, not a religious one. Many important local officials, among them the disciples of the most influential local scholar Xing

Quan 辛全 (1588-1636), were likely present at such meetings. Even though the majority of them were not Christian, many of them collaborated directly with the Jesuits, as attested by their many prefaces written for Jesuit publications at the time (Huang, 2006, p. 275).

PARENTHOOD AND EDUCATION

We have discussed above the active role of the local community in education, and so it is natural that Vagnone would have insisted on the role of parents. Supporting this, his treatise does not start with discussion about children or teachers as may be expected but begins by describing the role of parents as a child’s primary educators. This emphasis on the parent-child relationship is a hallmark of Renaissance ideas on childhood and parenthood, and we know how much Erasmus expressed mixed feelings for having been sent to boarding schools at an early age (Woodward, 1904, pp. 2-3). Vagnone has a very long section on breastfeeding, stressing the importance of the physical, psychological and moral relationship such breastfeeding establishes between an infant and his or her mother; so important was this to Vagnone that, in his view, no wet-nurse could ever replace the mother (Vagnone, 2017, pp. 160-161). Vagnone’s advice was going against the common practice of wealthy Chinese families seeking wet-nurses so that the mothers could not interrupt a series of pregnancies.

Fathers were always to be involved in educating their children; they were also responsible for finding appropriate teachers to act as second parents (*erfu* 二父; Vagnone, 2017, p. 166), thus supplementing and contributing toward the aims of the biological parents. Vagnone tells the famous story of a parent asking Aristippus how much he would charge for the education of his child. The father resisted giving the 500 drachmas which were asked and replied that for this price he could buy one slave. Aristippus replied saying: “Then, buy it; you would have a pair.” Indeed, without education, the child is unable to be a free citizen (Vagnone, 2017, p. 169). Through this story, Vagnone transmitted the ideal of liberal education, that is, an education empowering

2 I have recently edited and annotated the work: Vagnone, Alfonso 高一志 (2017). *Tongyou jiaoyu jinzhū* 童幼教育今注, annotated by Thierry Meynard 梅謙立, collated by Tan Jie 譚杰. Beijing: Commercial Press 商務印書館.

people to fulfil their duties as free citizens (*liber* in Latin). Thus, the responsibility of parents in educating children was not only for the good of the child, but also for the sake of the political community. For example, Vagnone mentions in the *Tongyou jiaoyu* an Athenian law according to which parents who did not provide an education for their children lost their status as parents and could not legally request financial support from their children in their old age (Vagnone, 2017, p. 164). In China, this law may have appeared to go against the tradition of filial piety, but it nonetheless stresses forcefully the obligations of parents to their children.

When *Tongyou jiaoyu* was re-edited in 1919, the educator Ma Xiangbo 馬相伯 (1840-1939) wrote a postscript. He himself had established Aurora University in 1903 and Fudan University in 1905 and, given this, it would be reasonable to expect him to have stressed the importance of school education. However, Ma embraced the *Tongyou jiaoyu*'s stress on parental education as the basis for living out a moral life (Vagnone, 2017, p. 242).

CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION AS A COMMON GOOD

The *Tongyou jiaoyu* is not a book on education, but a book of education, having shaped its readership through moral stories; it also created a common good within its community of readers, in both Jiangzhou and beyond. This common good consisted of a pool of symbolic resources attached to the names of ancient sages in the West, and of the building-up of a linguistic community in which individuals could symbolically identify themselves with figures of the past. Vagnone strove to consolidate such communities by providing them with moral examples from Western Classics. In doing this, Vagnone did not aim to displace Chinese culture, but to enrich it with complementary resources from the West. Through speeches and writings, the community became more and more familiar with Western names, some of which have since become very well-known today in China, such as Alexander the Great and Plato.

In the Jesuit pedagogy of the time, rhetorical education was the main medium for teaching. Students were judged not only on their memorisation of the material learned, but also on their skill in using it. These exercises were not dull or mechanical, but rather fostered students' imaginations. The *Ratio Studiorum* states that students have

to imitate some passages of a poet or orator, to write a description, say, of a garden, a church, a storm, to change an expression about in various ways, to turn a Greek speech into Latin or Latin speech into Greek... (*Ratio Studiorum*, 1970, p. 75)

All these exercises were intended to train oral skills in order to convince an audience.

The *Tongyou jiaoyu* promoted character education and virtue ethics which were and are in many ways congruent with Confucianism, and thus provided another resource in terms of language, symbols, and figures to enrich the local culture at that time.

The *Tongyou jiaoyu*, with its hundreds of quotes from wise people of Western antiquity, was opening to both the people of Jiangzhou and to all the Chinese a new window into a completely foreign culture with deep moral and historical roots; it was an important introduction to a culture which had enriched China in many ways. In the other direction, Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607), who was the first Jesuit to settle in China in 1579, some eleven years later in 1590, presented Philip II (1527-1598), then king of Spain and Portugal, with the first translations of the Confucian classics. This sharing of

intellectual resources across cultures provides us with an important lesson, namely, that it creates a common good which enriches all individual participating cultures. While the *Tongyou jiaoyu* may have been only one moment within this intercultural exchange, the work itself was deeply meaningful to Vagnone and the Chinese who collaborated with him.

For Vagnone, the aim of education should be the transformation of the moral self and the attainment of knowledge about the moral order of the universe. If education becomes merely instrumental in the pursuit of social position, then it has lost its meaning. This insistence on education matches the Confucian educational scheme, expressed in the *Analects*:

In a hamlet of ten houses you may be sure of finding someone quite as loyal and true to his word as I, but I doubt if you would find anyone with such love of learning. (Confucius, 1938, p. 114)

The Western humanistic tradition offered a new resource to China. It was not meant to replace the pre-existing Chinese tradition, evidenced by Vagnone often expressing Western values through Confucian terminology, but to show a different expression of morality so that new insights may be gained for the Chinese. It is quite striking to see the same focus on children's food, sleep and clothes, the same virtues being promoted, such as reverence for parents and elders, modesty and humility in speech and behaviour, and yet the concrete rules are quite different.

COMMON GOOD AND OFFICIAL INSTITUTIONS

It was the ambition of Vagnone and other Jesuits to establish schools in China. For this purpose, Vagnone describes in the *Tongyou jiaoyu* the curricula of grammar schools and universities (Vagnone, 2017, pp. 211-221). However, the field of education in China was almost entirely monopolised by the imperial examination system which opened access to positions in the administration. This meant that

Western education could be present in China, but only on the margins of society. This marginal position, however, had the advantage of offering a free space, unburdened by the pressure of exams.

The community for the advancement of the good, fostered by Vagnone and the Han family, received an official approval in 1640 when the prefect of Jiangzhou, Sun Shun, issued a decree restoring the community compact of his district. As Huang Yi-nong pointedly says, Han Lin very quickly "seized this opportunity" and composed the *Book of the Warning Bell*, or *Duoshu*, published in 1640 (Huang, 2006, p. 254). The bell referred to is not the bronze bell standing at the top of the church of Jiangzhou, but a portable wooden bell, traditionally used for announcements in the village and for summoning people to attend community compacts (*Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 1999, p. 190). The *Duoshu* is a commentary on the *Sacred Edicts* that were to be used during the regular meetings of the community. Some 22 scholars and officials were listed in show of support.

The *Duoshu* was meant to be read during the assemblies of the community compact, while Han Lin explained the moral teaching of the *Sacred Edicts*. Erik Zürcher noted the syncretistic nature of this book: "Han Lin's reasons are based on both Confucian and Christian arguments, not placed in juxtaposition (as an eclectic would do), but used to support each other, as the true syncretist does" (Zürcher, 1993, p. 89). Han Lin put much emphasis on the Confucian elements that were similar to Christianity, such as the notion of Heaven (*tian*). He also introduced several fundamental philosophical notions found in Christianity: a personal God, the unique nature of man, and the immortality of soul. However, addressing the *literati*, he refrained from introducing the core religious elements of Christianity, such as the salvation of mankind through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Han Lin illustrated his arguments with sayings and stories derived from Chinese and Western Classics, especially drawing material from the *Tongyou jiaoyu* and other works of Vagnone.

Vagnone died in 1640, and in 1644 Han Lin

surrendered to Li Zicheng (1605-1645). When the Manchus took power, they presented themselves as the upright avengers of the Ming dynasty, thus causing the Han Lin family to go into hiding (Meynard, 2014a, p. 147). Han Yun died in 1644, followed by Han Lin in 1649. The community of scholars established by Vagnone and the Han family, as well as their educational endeavours, thus came to an end. Their demise highlights the difficulty for grass-roots educational initiatives to find official approval.

CONCLUSION

The composition and use of the *Tongyou jiaoyu* highlights the role of the local community. Vagnone and the Han family supported an educational project, not primarily for the Catholic Church, but for the common good of the local community of Jiangzhou. The *Tongyou jiaoyu* promoted character education and virtue ethics which were and are in many ways congruent with Confucianism, and thus provided another resource in terms of language, symbols, and figures to enrich the local culture at that time. The result was the creation of a new educational framework founded on traditional Chinese culture, which was capable of exchanging values and symbols with a foreign culture. We strongly believe that this model of inter-cultural education is relevant today, as we are challenged to work toward the common good not only at the local and national levels, but also at the level of the entire human family.

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