

A Sad Case of Neglect: The First Chinese Book in New College Library

It is not really a book to linger over: it is rather scruffy, part of the cover is missing, and some of the pages are torn and ragged. What is more, it consists only of volume six and there is no sign of the missing volumes. And to cap it all, it is in Chinese. What was a book like this doing in New College Library in the seventeenth century, when nobody in England could read Chinese?

First of all, what exactly is this book? It is part of the book of Mengzi (perhaps 372-289 BCE), who is known in the West by his Latinized name, Mencius. Mengzi means ‘Master Meng’ and the book is named after him, as is the case with most early Chinese philosophical works. Like Confucius himself, Mencius spent his life as an itinerant philosopher not attached to any one of the many small states that made up China, but offering advice to various rulers on questions of governance and ethics. Tradition has it that he studied with Confucius’ grandson, but he was certainly educated in the Confucian school and the book, which was probably compiled by his followers, consists of anecdotes and of records of discussions between Mencius and assorted rulers, as in the following example.

Mencius said, ‘It was by benevolence that the three dynasties gained the throne, and by not being benevolent that they lost it. It is by the same means that the decaying and flourishing, the preservation and perishing, of States are determined. If the sovereign be not benevolent, he cannot preserve the throne from passing from him. If the Head of a State be not benevolent, he cannot preserve his rule. If a high noble or great officer be not benevolent, he cannot preserve his ancestral temple. If a scholar or common man be not benevolent, he cannot preserve his four limbs. Now they hate death and ruin, and yet delight in being not benevolent—this is like hating to be drunk, and yet drinking strong wine!’¹

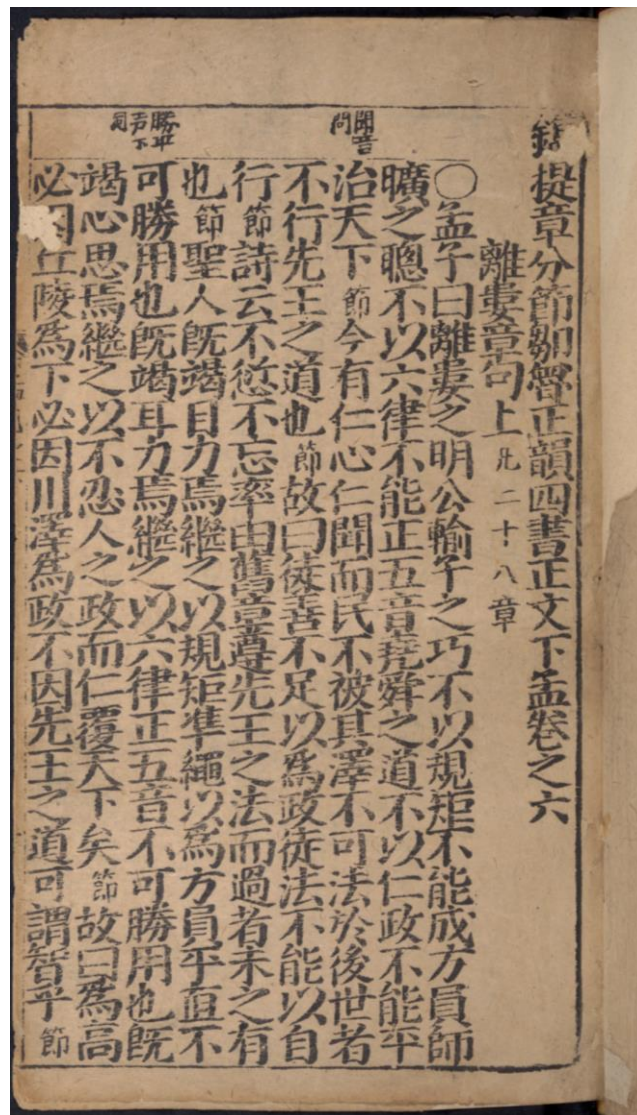
Here Mencius discourses on the key Confucian concept of ‘benevolence’ and argues that the survival of any state depends on the benevolence of its rulers.

Mencius is one of the most important texts in the Confucian tradition, and in the eleventh century it was canonized as one of the Four Books of the Confucian textual tradition, along with the *Analects*, the *Great Learning* and the *Doctrine of the Mean*. In time, the Four Books became the cornerstone of the educational system not only of China but of Japan, Korea, Vietnam and other neighbouring societies as well, and numerous editions were printed throughout East Asia, often with vernacular glosses.²

The full title of this book is *An edition of the standard text of the Four Books divided into sections and with the standard pronunciations of Zou and Lu* (*Juan ti zhang fen jie zou lu zheng yun si shu zheng wen* 鑄堤章分節鄒魯正韻四書正文), and, as this indicates, this solitary volume was originally part of a multi-volume edition of the Four Books. It was a popular rather than a scholarly edition, and in all likelihood, it was printed in the sixteenth century in Jianyang in Fujian Province, where commercial printing was concentrated at the end of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). So far, no other copies of any part of this edition have come to light anywhere else, so this lonely volume may be the sole surviving witness to it. It now has a leather binding, probably added in the late nineteenth century: rather grand clothing for a humble edition.

¹ Translation is that of James Legge (slightly adapted) and appears on the Chinese text project website: <<https://ctext.org/mengzi/li-lou-i>>.

² On the book of Mencius see D. C. Lau, ‘Meng tzu’, in Michael Loewe, ed., *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley: The Society for the Study of Early China, University of California, 1993), pp. 331-35. D. C. Lau was also the translator of Mencius for Penguin Classics.



First page of text
New College Library, Oxford, MS 324

When did it reach New College Library? In 1697, Edward Bernard (1638-1697), who was Savilian Professor of Astronomy, published a vast catalogue of books and manuscripts in the British Isles. The section on the holdings of New College ends with MS 323, so the book of Mencius, registered as MS 324, must have been acquired after Bernard had compiled the entry for New College (at some point before 1697). However, MS 324 presumably arrived before MS 325, which seems to have been bequeathed to the college in 1677.³ MS 324 probably arrived, then, at some time in the late seventeenth century.

After its arrival in New College Library, it seems to have been ignored for two centuries, and generations of fellows and students were unlikely to have been aware of its existence, let alone know anything about its subject matter. This poor, neglected book must have been grateful when, in 1876, James Legge (1815-1897) examined it and identified it.⁴ Legge grew up in Aberdeen and

³ James Willoughby, draft catalogue of the manuscripts of New College; Edward Bernard, gen. ed., *Catalogi librorum manuscriptorum Angliae et Hiberniae in unum collecti cum indice alphabetico* (Oxford: Sheldonian Theatre, 1697), vol. 1, part 2, p. 38; William Poole, 'The Receipt of Manuscripts in New College Library 1624-1852', *New College Notes* 8, no. 11 (2017), pp. 6-7.

⁴ According to a loose note written in his hand and inserted in the book; some other person has added Legge's name and the date.

in 1839 set out for China under the auspices of the London Missionary Society. He worked in Malacca and Hong Kong, finally returning to Britain in 1873. Knowledge of Chinese was understood to be indispensable for missionaries in China, but Legge went further, convinced that missionaries also needed a much better understanding of the societies in which they worked. To that end, he began what was to be his lifelong project of translating the Chinese classics into English. In 1875 he became a fellow of Corpus Christi College, and he served as the first Professor of Chinese at Oxford from 1876 to 1897.⁵ He came to examine this book in New College in 1876, his first year as professor: had he been alerted by a librarian, or had he made the round of the Oxford colleges in search of Chinese books? He identified the book but added no further information and does not seem to have been much interested in it, which is perhaps not surprising. For the College Library, however, it was worth knowing from a reliable authority that this was part of the book of Mencius. Just 22 years earlier, in 1854, another copy of Mencius was purchased by Thomas Dudley, an American on one of Commodore Perry's ships when they dropped anchor off Hakodate in Hokkaido. The crew were allowed to go shopping and quite a few of them bought books. Dudley was given to understand that the books he bought were a novel called 'The orphans of Mount Tsuruga, or the cruel uncle', but in fact it was two random volumes of a Japanese edition of Mencius.⁶ Dudley was evidently pleased, and doubtless the bookseller was too, having offloaded two stray volumes.

I have so far left unanswered the question of how this book came to be in New College Library in the first place. If you did not happen to be in China, where could you acquire a Chinese book in the seventeenth century? The best place was Amsterdam, as the studies of David Helliwell, former Chinese Librarian at the Bodleian, have shown.⁷ The Bodleian has about a quarter of all the extant Chinese books which reached Europe in the seventeenth century, and one of them, a late-Ming collection of morality tales, has on the cover a fascinating inscription in Dutch, dated 1603. The inscription bears witness to the availability of books and other curiosities at auctions in Amsterdam, and in 1605 the leading bookseller of Amsterdam actually published a catalogue of the Chinese books he had for sale.⁸

The back cover of the New College *Mencius* carries an interesting inscription, which reads, 'Mr Grimes. I have sent you a book printed in the language of China to show you the form of their print, which language no man can understand but themselves' (spelling modernised, here and in quotations below). It is interesting that the writer is aware that this is a printed book, for Chinese and Japanese printed books were often mistaken for manuscripts in seventeenth-century England. One Japanese book printed in the early seventeenth century and now in Cambridge University Library was bound in Western-style with lettering on the spine reading, 'Liber sinensis manuscriptus' (Chinese manuscript book), but the only word that is correct is 'Liber', for it is undoubtedly a book, but it is neither Chinese nor a manuscript.⁹

The note is unsigned, so who 'T' might be is a mystery. As for Mr Grimes, if he had some connection with Oxford then that might explain how this book came to be in New College Library. A number of people with the surname Grimes (or Grymes) were at Oxford in the seventeenth century, the most distinguished of them being Sir George, who matriculated in 1622, was knighted in 1628 and died in 1657. But he was at Brasenose, and none of the Grimes seem to have been associated with New College, so perhaps that is a red herring.¹⁰ At any rate, the writer clearly

⁵ N. J. Girardot, *The Victorian Translation of China: James Legge's Oriental Pilgrimage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

⁶ Chang-Su Houchins, *Artifacts of Diplomacy: Smithsonian Collections from Commodore Matthew Perry's Japan Expedition (1853-1854)*, Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology 37 (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 1995), pp. 132-33.

⁷ See his 'Chinese Books in Europe in the Seventeenth Century' and the learned entries in his Serica Blog, both available at <<http://serica.ie>>.

⁸ For this information, I am indebted to Helliwell's detailed account at <<https://serica.blog/2013/03/28/sinica-41/>>.

⁹ *Azuma kagami* (Cambridge University Library, FJ.274.17).

¹⁰ Joseph Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses: The Members of the University of Oxford, 1500-1714* (Oxford: James Parker & Co., 1891), vol. 2, p. 614.

thought that Grimes would be interested in the book, so Grimes was probably a bibliophile, perhaps with an interest in foreign languages.

Nevertheless, what is certain is that Grimes would have been unable to read it. This raises an important question. Why would he, or anybody else at that time, have had books like this in their collection? As it happens, he was by no means alone. John Bargrave (1610-1680), a canon of Canterbury Cathedral, had two Chinese books in his cabinet of curiosities, for example.¹¹ The Viney family of Northamptonshire had at least four Noh plays printed in Japan in the early years of the seventeenth century: three of them ended up in the Bodleian and one in Sidney Sussex College in Cambridge.¹² And Nicolaes Witsen (1641-1717), mayor of Amsterdam and Fellow of the Royal Society, had what he called a ‘moderate number’ of Chinese books, which he described as ‘an ornament to my library’ but he admitted that ‘the contents are not known to me’.¹³

Not only did some Europeans have Chinese or Japanese books that they could not read in their possession, but also some Europeans who had access to a supply of such books, perhaps like the person who sent the *Mencius* to Grimes, eagerly sent them to people they thought would be interested. Take the case of Richard Cocks (1566-1624), who was in charge of the East India Company’s outpost in Hirado, Japan, from its foundation in 1613 to its closure in 1623. On 10 December 1614 he wrote to several correspondents enclosing with each letter a Japanese almanac. To the Merchant Adventurers at Middelburg in Holland, he wrote, ‘Enclosed I send your Worships a Japan almanack whereby you may see their order of printing letters & characters, & how they divide the year into 12 months.’ Similarly, to William Cecil (1591-1668), the second Earl of Salisbury, in London, he wrote ‘Herewithall cometh a Japan almanack, whereby your Lord may see their printing’.¹⁴ Here, too, then, is the same emphasis on printed books as a curiosity.

Printed books from East Asia should not, however, be seen in isolation. Europeans travelling there in the seventeenth century began to take increasing interest in three aspects of the societies they visited or lived in: one was their flora, particularly their medicinal plants; another was the coinage; and thirdly there were the printed books. This was true of the Portuguese Jesuits in eighteenth-century Vietnam, where some of them used Chinese herbals to acquire knowledge of the medicinal plants of Japan.¹⁵ It was also true of the more intellectual employees of the Dutch East India Company in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Japan. They gathered specimens and artistic representations of plants and they collected coins and printed books, and all these things they brought back to Europe.¹⁶ Why did they do so? Surely, they did so because they had come to recognise that the world was larger than Europe, that sophisticated currency systems and means of printing books were to be found outside Europe, too, and that the flora of distant parts of the world could be of benefit in Europe.

Peter Kornicki
Robinson College, Cambridge

¹¹ David Sturdy and Martin Henig: *The Gentle Traveller: John Bargrave, Canon of Canterbury, and his Collection* (Abingdon: Abbey Press, 1983), pp. 2, 14 (cited in David Helliwell’s blog entry <<https://serica.blog/2013/03/28/sinica-41/>>).

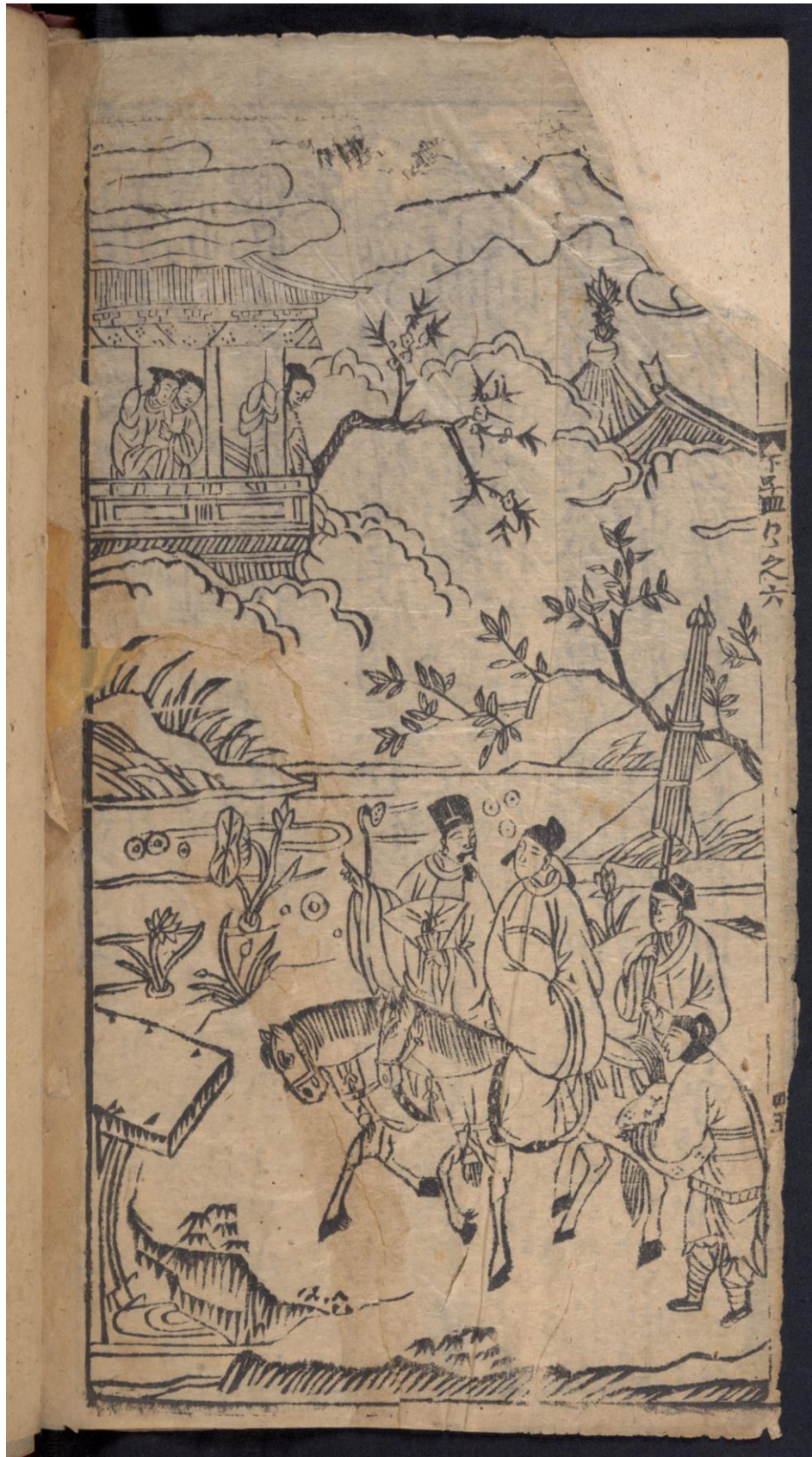
¹² Bodleian Library, Nipponica 131-133; Sidney Sussex College, Bb.7.2

¹³ J. F. Gebhard, *Het Leven van Mr. Nicolaas Cornelisz Witsen* (1641-1717), 2 vols. (Utrecht, 1881-82), vol. 2, p. 363.

¹⁴ Antony Farrington, *The English Factory in Japan, 1613-1623* (London: The British Library, 1991), pp. 251, 260.

¹⁵ This is clear from ‘Simplices Sinicos medicinaes com suas qualidades e virtudes tirados do livro, que tem por titulo Ý Haoc, traduzido pello P[Padre] Ant. ° [Antonio] de Barros da Comp.[Companha] de Jesus sendo Mission. ° [Missionario] na prov. ° [provincia] de Quãng Ngãi [Ngãi] em Coch. ° [Cochin China] circa anno 1756’, Academia das Ciências de Lisboa, manuscript Azul 335.

¹⁶ Peter Kornicki, ‘European Interest in Japanese Coins before 1853’, in Shin’ichi Sakuraki, Helen Wang, and Peter Kornicki, comp., *Catalogue of the Japanese Coin Collection (pre-Meiji) at the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 2010), pp. 27-32; Kornicki, ‘European Japanology at the End of the Seventeenth Century’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 56 (1993), pp. 502-524.



Final page, illustration
New College Library, Oxford, MS 324