

Plato Goes to China: The Greek Classics and Chinese Nationalism. By Shadi Bartsch. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023, Pp. 304. \$33.

Let me be clear from a start: I have found this book profoundly important and thoroughly refreshing to read. I find it raises crucial general intellectual issues in comparative intellectual history and that it cheerfully invites—and deserves—critical reflection throughout. That is why I am writing this review.

Shadi Bartsch's *Plato Goes to China: The Greek Classics and Chinese Nationalism* vividly describes the wildly oscillating ideological use of Plato, Aristotle, and, to a much lesser extent, Thucydides on twentieth-century Chinese intellectual history.¹ It examines how selected passages from these philosophers were made instrumental in changing ideological contexts and how they were weaponized in ideological cultural-political conflicts. More generally, the book explores how ancient philosophy and ancient historiography were put to modern ideological use in cross-civilizational discourse in China, touching, in particular, upon the significant role Western sociology—especially Max Weber—had played in Chinese ideological debates.

Philosophical and philological brushstrokes are almost journalistically broad throughout the book (hence its readability). But with a playful dialogic thinker like Plato, for example,² such doctrinal broad-brush interpretations are evidently problematic, and readers might be prone to be misconstrued as *yinshe* 隱射 (hidden agenda), particularly in cross-civilizational discourse.

I would like to thank my friend Haun Saussy from the University of Chicago for encouragement and help with this review.

¹ See Ansgar Allen, *Cynicism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), for a convincing argument that the philosophy of Diogenes of Sinope had a far more profoundly pervasive and even universal impact on Western intellectual history. Chinese has wonderfully idiomatic renderings for the concept of “cynicism,” such as the Westernized *quanru zhuyi* 犬儒主義, *chaofeng zhuyi* 嘲諷主義, the traditional *chaofeng* 嘲諷, as well as the impeccably classical *funshi jisu* 憤世嫉俗. Hu Ping's 胡平 *Quanru bing* 犬儒病 (Taipei: Boda chubanshe, 2005) construes “cynicism” as “the disease of the dog Confucianists.” Hans Steinmüller and Susanne Brandtstädter, eds., *Irony, Cynicism and the Chinese State* (London: Routledge, 2016), provides diverse Western perspectives on cynicism in China.

² Note, however, that Gadamer's book on Plato has been translated into Chinese: Jiadamoer 伽達默爾 (H. G. Gadamer), *Jiadamoer lun Bolatu* 伽達默爾論柏拉圖, tr. Yu Jiyuan 余紀元 (Beijing: Guangming ribao chubanshe, 1992).

In *Actors in the Audience*, Bartsch has observed: “Indeed, sincerity looms large in its absence from Tacitus’ texts, and it is this notion of an absent sincerity, too, that allows the existence of doublespeak and theatricality as paradigms for interaction between emperor and senators.”³ It turns out that this question of scholarly theatricality and sincerity is the elephant in Bartsch’s new book which—below the surface—is all about theatricality in public comparative philosophy. And how one would love to have a Tacitean version of her story here, analytically unveiling the personal intellectual realities behind the published façades, unmasking the public play of scholarly debate. Tacitus, we are told, “offers the truth behind the simulated truth, and calls it history.”⁴ However that may be, what we need very badly is a Tacitean variant of *Rulin waishi* 儒林外史, “*histoire curieuse du forêt des savants*.” Maybe this could never be carried out properly *sine ira et studio*, “without anger and bias.”⁵ But Bartsch makes one feel the need for it.

One comes to suspect that such a Tacitean approach to modern cross-civilizational discourse history might unveil something like competing *communities of intellectual complicity*, East and West. Communities of intellectual and moral complicity with intellectually stifling competing modes of cultural correctness that are beholden to economic superpowers.

One painfully obvious common feature of these communities of ideological complicity is the fast-increasing intolerance to disloyalty: everywhere ideological disagreement becomes a sign of moral decrepitude. Deviators and even doubters are increasingly deemed and declared to be “less than human.” In Russian the ubiquitous phrase has become *ne chelovek*, “he is not a human > he is a non-person.”

The still-open window of common deliberative philosophical sincerity across civilizations seems to be closing fast on all sides of the pond. All we seem left with are communities of contested intellectual complicity largely defined by competing economic superpowers.

³ Bartsch, *Actors in the Audience: Theatricality and Doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 190.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Tacitus, *Annales, Lateinisch-deutsch*, tr. Erich Heller, with an introduction by Manfred Fuhrmann (Mannheim: Artemis und Winkler, 2010), p. 26, *Annals* 1.2. In the context, Tacitus comments perceptively and incisively on the changing predicaments of Roman historians. Note the need for irony in such work, as described in Ellen C. O’Gorman, *Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Bartsch's book lays out for us a whole sequence of salient cases that vividly illustrate this point. She concentrates on Chinese intellectual history. But that history is a dark mirror for all.

Her opening case of Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) is, nevertheless, untypical. At some stage, for Liang Qichao, the model of Greek thinking was quintessential for the creation of a modernized post-dynastic China. In certain basic ways he thought of China as a conceptual underdog. That was to change, emphatically. But politically he bought into ancient Greek notions, emphatically. Greek antiquity mattered to him, very substantially and pragmatically.

The pervasive depth of historical perspective in the context of ideological discussion has a long history in China. It persists to this day. And Plato can come up in ideological discussions almost as naturally as Confucius can turn up in discussions of the incorrect line of Lin Biao 林彪 (1907–1971) in the *pi Lin pi Kong* 批林批孔 (literally “criticize Lin Biao and Confucius”) movement during the Cultural Revolution. In fact, Bartsch might have usefully dwelt on that feature of the Cultural Revolution, as a relevant point of comparison. This big movement did confirm a general pattern of historicist discourse in politics that continues to dominate today.

In response to manifest and manifested public desire for democratic civil rights, ideological discussions in China turn not so much to the Chinese constitution but to Aristotle's *Politics*. Not only did Aristotle defend and advocate slavery in the *polis*, even citizens were construed by him as slaves subservient to the all-important *polis*. Through the medium of a fairly detailed and very lively discussion of Aristotle's *Politics*, the political point driven home is that from the very start “democracy” has never worked and would never work anywhere. The Greek classic account of the theory of governance is weaponized in the ideological struggle for “democracy Chinese style.” The need for the word “democracy” here is remarkable.

For all its importance in the ideological struggle against the Greek-style democracy, Aristotle's *Politics* never became Chinese bedside reading, nor even a significant element of the educational curriculum. Not so for Plato's book, *Politeia*.

It has to be emphasized that Plato came to China remarkably late.⁶ But

⁶ The case of Russia deserves close comparison. In that country, Plato had his powerful impact from the mid-nineteenth century, and Platonism has remained an abiding religious inspiration ever since, with a striking emphasis on neo-Platonism and on Plotinus that has no clear parallel in China. What makes the cases so
(Continued on next page)

he got into Chinese in fine style: in beautifully crafted late classical Chinese. Plato's *Politeia* (Polity) was first translated by the learned educationalist Wu Xianshu 吳獻書 (1885–1944) in 1929.⁷ Wu's suggestive title *Lixiangguo* 理想國 (Ideal state) has remained the book's standard title today, although it was emphatically rejected for a time by Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓 in favour of the even less literal title, *Wang zhi* 王制, which I suppose one could try to translated as

(Note 6—*Continued*)

usefully comparable is that both involve a vast translation literature on Plato, with many complete translation projects, but in Russia Plato has not triggered anything like the Chinese nationalistic reception of the Graeco-Roman classics. The number of currently competing complete works of Plato in English, German, Russian, and Chinese is about the same. The case of the Chinese reception of Plato is certainly quite unique and does deserve our attention.

⁷ It is now available in a splendid new edition (in simplified characters) by Yilin chubanshe 譯林出版社 in Nanjing in 2011. Of special interest is the collaborative work by Zhang Shizhu 張師竹 and Zhang Dongsun 張東蓀, tr., *Bolatu duihua liuzhong* 柏拉圖對話六種 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1933); see also Zhang Shizhu and Zhang Dongsun, tr., *Bolatu duihua liuzhong* 柏拉圖對話六種 (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2011), which provides a carefully annotated translation of Euthyphron, Apology, Criton, Pheidon, Protagoras, and Menon. Zhang Dongsun was a distinguished professor of philosophy at Peking University. Less famous but no less interesting is classical Chinese translations in Guo Binhe 郭斌齋 and Jing Changji 景昌極, *Bolatu wu daduihua ji* 柏拉圖五大對話集 (Nanjing: Guoli bianyiguan, 1934). Plato's dialogues relating to the arts was already made available by China's great scholar of aesthetics, Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛 (1897–1986), in 1963 in his remarkable translation into modern Mandarin. The issue of the translatability of Plato's texts into pre-Westernized classical Chinese is of great importance in exploring the universality of Plato's works; the question often is: to what extent Plato's arguments are parochial in the sense that their plausibility rests on their being in a language sufficiently like Greek. It is a little unfortunate that the book under review has so much to say about Plato going to China, but nothing at all on how Plato goes into classical Chinese. (Translatability into modern Chinese is itself interesting enough—see Zhu Guangqian, *Bolatu wenyi duihua ji* 柏拉圖文藝對話集 [Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1963], pp. 333–66—but since Mandarin Chinese is a heavily Westernized and conceptually hellenized language, the case of Mandarin does not have the same deep anthropological interest. Clearly, Bartsch's stimulating book raises many important open questions for future research in a whole range of related areas.)

“Royal System (of governance).” One notes that the Chinese translations are far from being literal or exact, but they are certainly no more misleading than the universally accepted, extraordinary English translation of the title as “The Republic,” which quite misleadingly imposes a singularly inappropriate anti-royalistic terminology that spoils the openness of the Greek title for which there actually is, in English, a suitably abstract translation “Polity,” or “On Polity.”

Modern translations of Plato’s *Politeia* are so abundant now that I have lost count of how many different ones there are. Vast numbers of Chinese students have been expected to read this book. Millions of copies will not have been printed for nothing. The relevance of Plato is obvious not only for his argumentative hostility to democracy: he is particularly welcome, ideologically, for his insistence on the constitutive importance of hierarchy in society, in particular the idealization of the philosopher-king—an abstract notion which naturally leads Chinese ideological thinking onto its incarnations in Mao Zedong and his glorious successors at the helm of governance in China. More generally, Plato’s insistence on hierarchy with the golden men at the top, followed by the silver guards of the party and the bronze common people, was celebrated as significant moral support for current Chinese social sensibilities.

The rationally calculating *logically reasoning* part of man, prominent in Plato and even more so and explicit in Kant’s moral philosophy, turns out to have been anathema to Chinese thinking. This was essentially because Plato took no account of the cardinal metaphysical and moral importance of *qi* 氣, which is felt to be essentially close enough to the Greek *thumos*. The abstract rationalism of logically calculating rationality was not to the moral and intellectual *taste* of many Chinese intellectuals. They were disenchanted with deductive rationalism.

Max Weber’s complaint about the *Entzauberung der Welt*, awkwardly rendered everywhere in English as the “disenchantment of the world,”⁸ is shown in this book to have had a pervasive impact on modern Chinese intellectual and ideological history. Weber’s distinction between instrumental rationalism and value rationalism was widely discussed and supported. Instrumental rationalism was rejected as being insufficiently critical in the problematization and choice of the values and aims it is designed to achieve.

⁸ *Entzauberung* is “demystification of,” not “disenchantment of or with.”

Max Weber himself, of course, was only too well aware of the complexities beyond his basic distinction between instrumental rationality and value rationality that seems to have been all the rage in China. But for the purposes of this book, he is being treated with the same broad interpretive brushstrokes that seems to have dominated the ideological scene.

It becomes clear in the lively pages of this book that there was much more than a registration of the web of Weberian sociologies in all their vast complex ramifications. Inspired by Weberian analytic sociological concepts and methods, world intellectual history was being radically rewritten, we learn.

Leo Strauss's campaign for close reading of the classics in all their philological detail was more immediately and readily to the taste of the Chinese. His eagerness to read between the ancient lines of the classics, and his digging for the ultimate subtleties of esoteric inexplicit messages therein, were something that could be applied to the Chinese and the Western classics alike. This book gives a breezy idea of how Liu Xiaofeng's ever-increasing number of Ph.D. students and followers sallied forth and fanned out into the ancient classics: the resulting four hundred volumes of this campaign were written by a very large set of young Chinese scholars who came to develop something largely unheard of in the West.

What this book does not dwell on is that the authors of these books were scholars with a considerable advanced facility in the reading of Greek/Latin as well as normally also in their "native" classical Chinese. To put it very clearly: these were East-West-globally qualified scholars who were developing professional-level primary-language reading skills covering Latin, Greek, English, probably also German in many cases, and—crucially—classical Chinese. And they knew very well that very few Western sinologists are East-West-globally as well qualified to deal with primary sources as they are.

This group of East-West-globally qualified scholars in the humanities has grown considerably since the 1980s when I felt I had to submit to the Vice President He Fangchuan 何芳川 (1939–2006) of Peking University that he desperately needed to build up teaching competence in Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit if he cared at all for the development of historical humanities (*wen shi zhe* 文史哲) in China. Today, I do have a list of sixty-four Chinese universities with the names of 179 professors occupying teaching positions for Western classics. All these scholars hold doctoral degrees. The vast majority of these scholars, apart from their professional specialization in Western classics, are also highly literate in classical Chinese.

This seems to be true even of He Xin 何新,⁹ whose views on Greek history are so unhinged that I have wanted to see the Chinese original, but who supports his case with recondite literary references. He Xin does claim that the philosophers and scientists from Greece are not Greek but African,¹⁰ and that the works of the famous so-called Greeks, including Homer, Thucydides, Herodotus, and Aristotle, are all “no longer the original ancient Greek works” (ibid., p. 49; my translation).

It is interesting to note how historical scholarship can become so ideological that it is reminiscent of books in the style of the *Zhongguo keyi shuo bu* 中國可以說“不” movement of the 1990s. Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena*,¹¹ while detailing the non-Greek origins of Greek culture, nowhere sinks stylistically as low as He Xin does in these two volumes.

Fearlessly, Bartsch declares herself uninterested in citing “institutional Greco-Roman classicists” (p. xi). She is more amused by what sparks off reactions in newspapers, blog sites, and the social media—and for politics. But subliminally, what she diagnoses in her broad-brush crypto-politicized discourse on matters Greek is—more dustily, she might feel—just as present in turgid ordinary dusty academic discourse of studies in the Western classics.

And those things she diagnoses as happening in the loud mud-slinging ideological *tours de force* by the Liu Xiaofengs and Gan Yangs 甘陽 of this

⁹ He Xin, a member of the central Chinese Academy of Social Sciences since 1990, is the author of some twenty books and is listed as a member of the Political Consultative Conference of China. His views may be usefully compared to those advocated by the even more learned Anatoly Fomenko who declared most of Western history to be pseudo-history in the lavishly illustrated and documented seven volumes: Anatoly Fomenko, *History, Fiction or Science Chronology 1*, second edition revised (Paris; London; New York: Delamere Publishers, 2003–2006). The theory behind this is expounded in a long list of Russian publications by the same author. Unsurpassed among these is Anatolij T. Fomenko’s Анатолий Тимофеевич Фоменко, *Русские корни “древней” латыни. Языки и письменность Великой Империи* [Russian roots of “ancient” Latin: Languages and writing in the Great Imperium] (Moscow: Astrel’, 2009), which provides 600 pages of “alternative linguistic facts” to establish Russian as the root of ancient languages.

¹⁰ He Xin, *Xila weishi xukao* 希臘偽史續考 (Beijing: Zhongguo yanshi chubanshe, 2015), p. 22.

¹¹ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, vol. 1 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

world as Plato goes to China, these selfsame things *do* also happen in their subtle ways on the quieter level of philological exchanges between East and West. I, for one, see this happening everywhere, in particular in Russian sinology and in France.¹² And moreover, it is important to realize that Liu Xiaofeng and Gan Yang are professors teaching the classics.

The academic study of Confucianism has taken on strong political features everywhere. Daniel A. Bell, Chair Professor of Political Theory at the University of Hong Kong, teaches Confucianism. In the preface to his important book, *The Dean of Shandong: Confessions of a Minor Bureaucrat at a Chinese University*,¹³ he does express his special gratitude to Badi Bartsch-Zimmer. This is not just any book: it is concurrently made available in an audio version on *audible.com*, and it is a modern polished Confucian-faith-autobiographical *Apologia pro vita sua* in the People's Republic of China. This book is the culmination of a profusion of other like-minded works by the same author.

Clearly, the politicized state-neo-Confucian movement in the West is alive, well-publicized—and well-financed. But nothing in this movement has quite achieved the urbane narrative readability, the informally light-touch sarcastic self-distancing, and the fresh analytic good humour of Bartsch's book.

Looking with critical Chinese eyes at the Western classics is surely a salubrious exercise, and it is ideologically important. The great educator Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988), Mao Zedong's teacher, has insisted in conversation with me, shortly before his death, that the close reading of Greek texts was very important to his intellectual development, and Zhu Guangqian, whom I never got to meet, was a meticulous translator, interpreter, and reader of Plato. Bartsch could perhaps have devoted a helpful paragraph to the distinct type of the classical Greek Platonic impact on these great educators.

For scholars like Zhu and Liang, I suspect, the modern ideological criticism of Western classics would be no more than paraphrases of well-known Greek self-criticism. Thus, even when it comes to Aristotle on slavery,

¹² See L. S. Perelomov, Конфуций и конфуцианство с древности до настоящее время, V в. до н.э.-XXI в- [Confucius and Confucianism—from antiquity to the present time, 5th century BC to 21st century] (Moscow: Stilservis, 2009); A. S. Martynov, Классическое конфуцианство [Classical Confucianism], vol. 1 (St. Petersburg: Olma Press, 2000); and Martynov, Конфуцианство. Лунь юй. В двух томах [Analects. In two volumes] (St. Petersburg: Петербургское Востоковедение, 2001).

¹³ Daniel A. Bell, *The Dean of Shandong: Confessions of a Minor Bureaucrat at a Chinese University* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

one could have discussed how exactly it was possible that, as the rationalist he undoubtedly was, he came to *disregard* instead of refuting the following decisive argument against slavery which he attributes to others:

. . . others however maintain that for one man to be another man's master is contrary to nature, because it is only convention that makes the one a slave and the other a freeman and there is no difference between them by nature, and that therefore it is unjust, for it is based on force.¹⁴

What did Aristotle think was wrong with his argument, one wonders. Given this argument: why exactly was there no abolitionism at all anywhere in antiquity? One would very much like to discuss such “academic” questions from a global perspective with one's Chinese colleagues.

The section of Jesuit missionary transmission of Greek and Latin classics to China does not link very closely into Bartsch's narrative in this book. Nonetheless, the subject is important as background information, and it raises interesting issues, particularly on how Aristotle went to China, and how it went for him there. For the Jesuits in the seventeenth century, Aristotle always remained *the* Philosophus, as he had been for Thomas Aquinas. The valiant attempt to introduce Aristotelian logic to the Chinese intellectual public produced a very beautiful book that we may still admire. But the great Philosophus failed to impress in Ming and Qing China. The often half-hearted and selective Chinese version of *Categories*, with their elaborate commentaries from Coimbra in Portugal, went unread in imperial China.¹⁵ Perhaps Pu Lin's 溥林 *Fanchou pian jianshi* 《範疇篇》箋釋¹⁶ can be registered as one of the more substantial and professional studies of that foundational text, but Pu Lin, there again, is not even dismissed but simply disregarded by serious Western scholars

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Harris Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944), <https://topostext.org/work/100> (accessed 4 November 2025).

¹⁵ Fu Fanji 傅汎際 (Francisco Furtado) and Li Zhizao 李之藻, trans., *Mingli tan* 名理探 (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1965). The beautiful first edition of 1631 Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits Chinois 3413, is available in pdf format on Gallica. For a study by a specialist in Aristotelian philosophy, see Robert Wardy, *Aristotle in China—Language, Categories and Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁶ Pu Lin, *Fanchou pian jianshi* (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2009).

of Aristotle who are not prone to considering global and cross-cultural aspects of the field of philosophical logic.¹⁷

In 1933 the great scholar Xiang Da 向達 published a *Yalishiduode lunlixue* 亞里士多德倫理學 (Aristotle's Ethics) as a classical Chinese translation of *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*.¹⁸ This work remained influential as a translation of Aristotle on the principles of ethics that were, in a way, conventional and close to the Chinese *li* 禮. But, of course, Aristotle's rules were not accepted as a contingently obligatory tradition. Aristotle attempted to present them in a reasoned and principled way, taking into account the close relations of ethics to social relations.

Aristotle's great teacher, Plato, whose pervasive influence on Christian theology has been manifest through the millennia, figures nowhere in the many volumes of that very precious and closely guarded *Yesuhui Luomadang'anguan Ming Qing tianzhujiao wenxian* 耶穌會羅馬檔案館明清天主教文獻 published in Taiwan.¹⁹ In the two magisterial bibliographic volumes *Handbook of Chinese Christianity*, Plato is also not mentioned as having played any role whatever.²⁰

Euclid was meticulously translated into classical Chinese. There were logically crucial improvements of the Chinese vis-à-vis the Greek: in proofs by *reductio ad absurdum* the Greek word *adunaton* ("impossible") was rendered not by anything like *bu keneng* 不可能 as one might have thought, but by the logically much superior *bu ketong* 不可通, not "physically impossible" but logically "inconceivable, unthinkable." But this was all to no avail: the crucial methodological and indeed philosophical side of Euclid went unreceived.

The *Enchiridion*, a summary of the thoughts of a freed slave whom the Emperor Marcus Aurelius was proud to hail as his philosophical master, by

¹⁷ See Christoph Harbsmeier, "The Hazards of Using English as the Default Language in Analytic Philosophy: An Essay on Conceptual Biodiversity," in Paul W. Kroll and Jonathan A. Silk, eds., *At the Shores of the Sky: Asian Studies for Albert Hoffstädt* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 292–308.

¹⁸ Welldon, J. E. C., tr. *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle, translated with an analysis and critical notes by J. E. C. Welldon D.D., Dean of Manchester* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1912); Xiang Da, tr., *Yalishiduode lunlixue* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1933).

¹⁹ Adrianus Dudink and Nicolas Standaert, *Yesuhui luomadang'anguan Ming Qing tianzhujiao wenxian* (Taipei: Taipei Ricci Institute, 2002).

²⁰ Nicolas Standaert, ed., *Handbook of Christianity in China*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

Epictetus was deemed palatable in Ming China. But it has to be added that an augmented extensive collection of quotations from Cicero's *De amicitia* (On friendship), under the appropriate title *Jiaoyoulun* 交友論 (Discourse on making friends), became something of a real best-seller in Ming times.²¹ A splendid bilingual and profusely annotated edition of this bears witness to the bibliographic success of this book. Several works of Aristotle clearly merit similar careful attention to the way Aristotle was found to need adaptation before he could go to China.²²

We are told a great deal in this splendid book about how Plato and Aristotle caught on in China, how they were (ab)used in China. But I found very little on how their texts themselves actually “got into Chinese,” how they came across first in classical/literary Chinese (*wenyanwen* 文言文), and then in the much more Westernized standard Mandarin. This book is written in those philologically as well as philosophically very broad and lively brushstrokes that make it so hard to put down until one has indulged in the whole thing.

There is no time here for the philosophically essential question of how much, in fact, of the elusive literary and philosophical essence of Plato's and Aristotle's thought has ever come across into Chinese, or how much of Plato's playful irony of a philosophical comedian has actually ever seriously been registered in the Middle Kingdom. After all, looming in the background of this

²¹ See Matteo Ricci, *Dell'amicizia* (Rome: Quodlibet, 2005), esp. the introduction, pp. 138–43. Compare also Matteo Ricci, *On Friendship*, tr. Timothy Billings (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); and, on details of translation, Christoph Harbsmeier, “Matteo Ricci, *On Friendship*, and Some Latin Sources for His Chinese Book,” in Ivo Amelung and Joachim Kurtz, eds., *Reading the Signs: Philology, History, Prognostication. Festschrift for Michael Lackner* (Munich: Iudicium, 2018), pp. 175–212. As for Cicero's text, the best commentaried edition remains: Moritz Seyffert, *M. Tullii Ciceronis Laelius, De amicitia dialogus, Mit einem Commentar zum Privatgebrauche für reifere Gymnasialschüler und angehende Philologen bearbeitet von Moritz Seyffert, zweite Auflage befohrt von C. F. W. Müller* (Leipzig: Otto Holtze, 1876). It is a pity that Bartsch does not mention Ricci's important choice of what to present to the Chinese public.

²² Detailed adapted versions of Aristotle's *De anima*, *De caelo*, etc. duly lined up in Standaert, *Handbook of Christianity in China*, vol. 1, pp. 635–1800, were produced but are still waiting for the close philological attention they so evidently deserve in the context of comparatist intellectual history, conceptual parochialism, and conceptual contagious transmissibility.

book is the ominously important question: what exactly it is, philosophically, conceptually, logically, stylistically, and poetically, that gets lost in transition, when Plato goes to China. Even more importantly, perhaps: what is added to our detailed philosophical analysis of Plato's message when we seriously consider the dimensions of its linguistic parochialism—for example, the constraints on the translatability of the classical Greek into a language like classical Chinese. That question can be restated very simply: how much of Plato's thinking depends on the contingencies of classical Greek language structure. In her very own way, Bartsch may have alerted us, indirectly, to a sensitive spot in the study of Plato's philosophical sensibilities. Among the many virtues of this engaging book is the implicit invitation to address this need.

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