



# Early Translation and Dissemination of Ancient Chinese Primer Classic *Mingxin baojian* and Its Influence on Western Sinology

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## Abstract

The Chinese primer classic *Mingxin baojian* compiled by Fan Liben, a scholar in the late Yuan and early Ming Dynasty, is a collection of aphorisms and moral sayings from Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions urging people to do good deeds. It is the first Chinese classic to be translated and introduced to the West in the history, with versions available in Spanish, Latin, German, and English. By employing historical document compilation method, this study attempts to conduct an in-depth analysis of the early translation, dissemination and influence of *Mingxin baojian* in the West from the perspectives of cross-cultural studies. The study found that *Mingxin baojian* was retranslated into different Western languages for several times, spread widely in Western European culture circle, including Spain, Germany, United Kingdom and United States, which exerted great influence on cross-cultural exchange between China and the West, comparative ethics and philosophy and contribution to rise of Western Sinology.

## Keywords

*Mingxin Baojian*; dissemination; influence; Sinology

## 1. Introduction

The Chinese classic *Mingxin baojian* is a collection of aphorisms and moral sayings urging people to do good deeds, compiled by Fan Liben, a scholar in the late Yuan and early Ming Dynasty. The work, comprising twenty chapters, was first printed in Wulin (present-day Hangzhou), the 26th year of the Hongwu reign (1393). The term "Mingxin" refers to "illuminating the heart and perceiving one's nature," while "Baojian" signifies a "precious mirror," encouraging readers to use the book as a mirror for self-reflection and self-discipline. It draws heavily from earlier educational texts such as the Tang dynasty's *Taigong Jiaojiao*, *Wenci Jiaolin*, *Xinji Wenci Jiuqing Chao*, and the Yuan dynasty's *Jingxing Lu*. Grounded in the Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist philosophical traditions, *Mingxin baojian* compiles teachings of Chinese sages prior to the Ming dynasty, focusing on personal moral cultivation, self-discipline, life management, and the philosophy of conduct. The text includes aphorisms from thinkers such as Confucius, Mencius, Zhuangzi, Laozi, and Zhu Xi, and also incorporates popular sayings, making it a valuable tool for moral education. As both a children's primer and a moral exhortation text, *Mingxin baojian* is divided into twenty chapters, each addressing themes such as cultivating goodness, adhering to natural law, accepting fate, practicing filial piety, self-rectification, contentment, mindfulness, temperance, encouragement of learning, child instruction, introspection, teaching principles, governance, family management, righteous conduct, observing propriety, maintaining trust, speech, friendship, and women's conduct. Its content largely stems from the selective adaptation of earlier classical

works, combined with moral sayings, embodying the text's significant ethical and didactic value. The title “Mingxin” derives from the Buddhist concept of “illuminating the mind and perceiving one’s nature,” while “Baojian” means “precious mirror”, signifying the book's role as a reflective guide for individuals to cultivate inner virtue and strive for a life of goodness. Western Sinologists have extensively translated and introduced *Mingxin baojian* since the 16th century, producing versions in Spanish, Latin, German and English. It holds the distinction of being the first Chinese classic to be translated and disseminated to the West, achieving profound influence on a global scale.

In recent years, some scholars worldwide have conducted studies on the translation of *Mingxin baojian*. In 1993, Lou Chengzhao (1993) discussed the translation of *Mingxin baojian* and its dissemination to Spain. Zhou Anbang (2009) of Feng Chia University, in his doctoral dissertation *A Study of Mingxin baojian*, analyzed the nature of the text, its compilation, authorship, versions, overseas circulation, and philosophical content. Li Chaoquan (2014), in the article “*Mingxin baojian*: A Self-Cultivation Book Popular for Over 600 Years” published in *Reading Digest*, explored the dissemination of the book in Korea as an entry point to elaborate on its transmission across East Asia. Wen Yongning (2015) analyzed the Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist ideologies in *Mingxin baojian*, discussing its Daoist elements and its spread in East Asia. Yan Ye (2018) examined the English translations of *Mingxin baojian* featured in the modern English-language periodicals *The Indo-Chinese Gleaner* and *The Chinese Repository*, focusing on their characteristics, purposes, cultural stances, and impacts. Zhang Shan (2021), in her master's thesis, *Understanding Cultural Terms in Mingxin baojian and Their Translation into Spanish*, provided a detailed analysis of the Spanish translations of *Mingxin baojian* while correcting mistranslations found in these versions. Gao Yuan (2021) published *A Study of the First Introduction of Confucian Classics to Europe*, using *Mingxin baojian* as an example to analyze the translation process and the lineage of its editions. Other scholars have shifted their focus to the overseas dissemination of *Mingxin baojian*. Fan Chonggao and Tan Jinmin (2022) explored aspects such as textual verification, punctuation, collation, and annotated translations in the extant editions of the traditional primer *Mingxin baojian*. Hu Wenting and Zhang Xiping (2022) examined the source text, translation context, and distinctive features of Gao Muxian’s manuscript translation of *Mingxin baojian*. Hou Xingquan, Wu Nankai, Su Zhuoli, and Cheng Jiayu (2022) compared the depth and breadth of the overseas dissemination of *Mingxin baojian* and *Hua Jian Ji*. Wang Pei and Xu Mingwu (2023) reviewed the history of *Mingxin baojian*’s translation into foreign languages, analyzing the pragmatic motivations behind translations in various periods. Rachel Junlei Zhang and Juan Pablo Gil-Osle (2024) examine the relationship between the manuscript translation of *Mingxin baojian* (*Precious Mirror for Enlightening the Mind*) (circa 1590) by Juan Cobo (circa 1546-1592) and the Fujian book market in China. It explores the cultural implications of Cobo’s translation by focusing on the commentary he provided in the marginalia of the manuscript. However, there is relatively little academic research on the Western dissemination and influence of *Mingxin baojian* on Western Sinology. To fill this research gap, this study attempts to delve into the early translation, transmission and influence of *Mingxin baojian* on Western Sinology.

## 2. Early Translation and Dissemination of the Chinese Primer *Mingxin baojian* in the West

The translation and transmission of *Mingxin Baojian* can be traced back to the late 16th century. The earliest known European translation is a Latin manuscript by the Italian missionary and Sinologist Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607), which is currently recognized as the first European version of *Mingxin baojian* (Hu & Zhang, 2022).

The Spanish translation of *Mingxin baojian* by Juan Cobo (1546-1592), a Dominican missionary and Sinologist, completed in 1587, was regarded as the earliest Western version of *Mingxin baojian* (Zhang, 2016). Juan Cobo was a Spanish Dominican missionary, whose work enriched early Sinology and contributed to Sino-Iberian relations at the time. He travelled to Mexico in 1586 and later to Manila in 1588. It was in Manila that he gained access to a copy of the Chinese moral primer *Mingxin baojian* and completed his translation with the help of Chinese collaborators. Following the Sino-Iberian tradition of Sinology, the title of Cobo’s manuscript will be shortened to BSPC based on the transcribed title in the Minnan dialect, Beng Sim Po Cam (BSPC), instead of *Mingxin baojian* in Mandarin Chinese. His purpose was twofold: to convert local Chinese immigrants by learning their language and to assist other missionaries in acquiring Chinese language skills (Zhang, 2016). He primarily employed a strategy of literal translation complemented by free translation. Cobo’s BSPC manuscript comprises 221 pages, with Spanish translation on the recto of the folios and the Chinese text on the verso. and is now housed in the Spanish National Library. Influenced by the medieval Catholic tradition of adapting to Greek philosophy, Cobo applied pre-existing conceptual frameworks to interpret and contextualize this unfamiliar text. This “adaptive strategy” was widely employed by early Jesuits, such as Matteo Ricci, as part of their missionary approach (Jiang, 2012).

After its completion, Cobo's friend and superior, Miguel de Benavides, took it back to Spain and presented it to the crown prince and future king, Philip III (1599-1621) on 23 November 1595 (Zhang & Gil-Osle, 2024).

Italian Jesuit missionary Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607) translated the *Mingxin baojian* into Latin in 1591, under the title "China, seu humana institutio". Ruggieri's translation was part of his broader efforts to introduce Chinese classical texts to Europe, facilitating cultural and intellectual exchanges between East and West. In 1676, another Spanish Dominican missionary, Fernando Navarrete (1618-1689), retranslated Cobo's version of *Mingxin baojian*, adding annotations. His translation was included as the fourth chapter in his work *Tratados Históricos, Éticos y Religiosos de la Monarquía de China* (Historical, Ethical, and Religious Treatises on the Chinese Monarchy).

In the eighteenth century, François Noël (1651-1729) cites the *Mingxin baojian* a number of times in his *Philosophia Sinica* when adducing textual evidence for his analysis of Chinese belief, values, and philosophical notions. He didn't use Navarrete's translation, but created his own Latin translations from a Chinese original, most likely the one still kept at the Archives of the Society of Jesus in Rome (Chan, 2002).

German translation followed the Spanish translation. In 1863, the renowned German Sinologist Johann Heinrich Plath (1802-1874) translated *Mingxin baojian* into German under the title *Problem chinesischer Weisheit nach dem Ming sin pao kiem* (Problems of Chinese Wisdom According to *Mingxin baojian*). He mentioned Navarrete and Noël, but produced his own translation from a Chinese original at his disposal. He was the first scholar to subject the text to a source-critical reading, trying to trace and evaluate the provenance and authenticity of all individual sayings in the *Mingxin baojian*. In this he was an early pioneer of the modern critical philological study of the *Mingxin baojian*.

In 1818, the British missionary and Sinologist William Milne (1785-1822) introduced and partially translated *Mingxin baojian* in the English quarterly *The Indo-Chinese Gleaner*. He expressed his view that "these sketches are intended in a great measure for those who may study Chinese" (Morrison & Milne, 1818). The sentiment is shared in John Francis Davis's (1795-1890) bilingual collection of Chinese Moral Maxims of 1822, many of whose samples were drawn from the *Mingxing baojian* (Davis, 1823). His version was an abridged translation. In 1847, *The Chinese Repository* republished Milne's translation in full. Milne's English rendition of *Mingxin baojian* being republished in the Chinese Repository was not a random occurrence. It was partly due to Walter Henry Medhurst's acknowledgment of Milne's translation and also influenced by the criteria for selecting translations in *The Chinese Repository*. The translations of Chinese classics in *The Chinese Repository* tended to exhibit certain patterns. Fewer works with strong literary elements like poetry and drama were included, with translations often prioritizing the practical value of the original texts. This practical value was evident in the valuable information these texts contained, their role in aiding language acquisition, and their contribution to the spread of Christian teachings (Yan, 2018).

In 1837, the prominent Russian Orthodox monk and Sinologist Archimandrite Daniil (Dmitri Petrovich Sivillov, 1789-1871) published an abridged Russian translation of *Mingxin baojian* in Kazan, based on his work in Beijing. He later completed a full translation in 1855, titling the manuscript *Mingxin baojian: Selected Works of the Best Chinese Writers* (Fang, 1969). Archimandrite Daniil's translation of the *Mingxin baojian* marked one of the earliest Russian-language renditions of a major Chinese ethical work. His efforts were part of the broader mission of the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing, which aimed to foster mutual understanding between Russian and Chinese cultures.

In 1863, Johann Heinrich Plath (1802-1874), a notable German sinologist, published a German translation of the *Mingxin baojian* under the title "Nach dem Chinesischen des Ming-sin-pao-tsien" (translated as "From the Chinese of the *Mingxin baojian*"). During this period, German Sinology was often referred to as "amateur Sinology." German missionaries, scholars, and merchants pursued the study of China out of curiosity and personal interest, focusing on Chinese language and classical literature. The Confucian ideology embedded in *Mingxin baojian* as a traditional primer made it a natural choice for translation (Wang & Xu, 2023).

Later, a Dominican theologian, Luis G. Alonso Getino (1877-1941), published a transcript of the *Beng Sim Po Cam*'s Spanish text in 1924, i.e., without the Chinese original. In 1959, Carlos Sanz published his translation *Beng Sim Po Cam o Espejo Rico del Claro Corazon*, which was the facsimile edition in the National Library of Spain. Manel Ollé translated *Rico Espejo del Buen Corazon (Beng Sim Po Cam)* in Barcelona in 1998, which is the modern edited version of the original Spanish text. Liu Limei's Annotation named *Espejo Rico del Claro Corazon* was published in Madrid in 2005, which is a bilingual version with Spanish annotation. In 1929, the esteemed French Sinologist Paul Pelliot (1878-1945) published an article in the journal *T'oung Pao* titled "Notes sur quelques livres ou documents conservés en Espagne" ("Notes on Some Books or Documents Preserved in Spain"). In this work, Pelliot introduced and analyzed a Spanish translation of the Chinese text *Mingxin baojian* ("The Precious Mirror for

*Enlightening the Mind*”), which had been completed by the Dominican missionary Juan Cobo in the Philippines before 1592.

The selection of *Mingxin baojian* by European Sinologists was driven by the intrinsic needs of Western cultures for this work. When presenting foreign texts, translators often establish the authority of the work by highlighting its significance in its original cultural context, a common practice for legitimizing translations (Kong, 1999). These early translations played a pivotal role in introducing Chinese moral and philosophical thought to Western Europe. They provided European scholars and missionaries with insights into Chinese ethical teachings, fostering a deeper understanding of Chinese culture. The translations also highlighted the complexities involved in cross-cultural translation, as translators like Cobo and Ruggieri navigated linguistic and conceptual differences to convey the essence of the original text.

### 3. Influence of the Chinese Primer *Mingxin baojian* on the Western Sinology

The translation and dissemination of the *Mingxin baojian* from the late 16th century to the 19th century into Western European cultural circles illustrates the initial endeavors of cultural interchange between China and Europe. The translated work not only brought Chinese cultural classics to the Western world but also significantly impacted Western Sinology by fostering cross-cultural exchange between China and the West, comparative ethics and philosophy, and rise and development of Western Sinology.

#### 3.1 Cross-cultural Exchange Between China and the West

The early translations of the *Mingxin baojian* established a model for future translations of Chinese texts, opening the door to a deeper engagement with Chinese literature and philosophy in the Western world. When delving into the *Mingxin baojian*, Cobo, a novice in Chinese with limited resources, turned to the Bible for assistance in understanding the Chinese content. Alongside Cobo, several other Spanish translators, such as Michele Ruggieri, Fernando Navarrete, P. Getino, Carlos Sanz, Manel Olle, and Liu Limei, contributed to this endeavor. The Spanish-Chinese manuscript of Juan Cobo's *Mingxin baojian* is housed at the National Library of Spain in Madrid. In March 2023, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties between China and Spain, the sealed *Mingxin baojian* manuscript, untouched for over four centuries, was unveiled in mainland China. This edition, presented in Chinese for the first time, includes the letter to the Spanish crown prince and Juan Cobo's annotations on the *Mingxin baojian*, offering valuable historical perspectives on how Westerners viewed Chinese culture during the early interactions between the two civilizations. Despite the geographical distance between Spain and China, historical records show Spain's active assimilation of Chinese culture, with a particular emphasis on Confucian teachings. According to Spanish scholar Idoia Arbillaga, twenty-one Confucian classics have been translated into Spanish, albeit mostly through indirect means. Notably, there exist at least 23 Spanish versions of the *I Ching (Book of Changes)*. Presently, Chinese classics like the *I Ching*, Analects of Confucius, and *Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching)* can still be found in Spanish bookstores, underscoring Spain's enduring fascination with Chinese philosophy and literature. The influence of these translations extended to academia, with universities in Western countries such as Germany and the United States subsequently establishing doctoral programs dedicated to the study of Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism, demonstrating the lasting impact of these early translations on Western philosophical and cultural discourse. The Harvard-Yenching Library at Harvard University holds a two-volume edition of *Mingxin baojian* titled *Newly Engraved Annotated Official Edition of Mingxin baojian with Phonetic Guides (Xinjuan Titi Yinshi Guanban Dazi Mingxin Baojian Zhengwen)*, published in 1601 during the Wanli reign by Zheng Jihua's publishing house in Shulin. The text's aphoristic style made it accessible to both Chinese and Western audiences, serving as a bridge for cross-cultural dialogue between Christian missionaries and Chinese scholars.

#### 3.2 Comparative Ethics and Philosophy

One of the earliest known translations of the *Mingxin baojian* into a Western language was undertaken by Jesuit missionaries during the 16th and 17th centuries. The *Mingxin baojian*, with its easy-to-understand aphorisms and moral teachings, emerged as a text that facilitated the connection between Chinese and Western moral philosophies. Initial translations and interpretations of this text acquainted Western scholars with essential Confucian ethical concepts. These translations played a crucial role in introducing Chinese moral philosophy to European scholars who were keen on exploring Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Parts of the classic were rendered into Latin and

integrated into Jesuit studies of Chinese culture. The *Mingxin baojian* highlights virtues like filial piety, humility, and sincerity, which struck a chord with European intellectuals intrigued by comparative ethics. These translations left a mark on European understandings of Chinese ethics and philosophy, especially influencing enlightenment figures such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Voltaire. Philosophers such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz perceived Chinese moral philosophy as a rational ethical system that could complement Christian doctrines. The focus on self-improvement and moral uprightness in the *Mingxin baojian* presented an alternative ethical structure that garnered admiration from European scholars. Moreover, Voltaire, a prominent figure of the Enlightenment in France, displayed a profound interest in Chinese philosophy and ethics. His appreciation for Confucian principles, coupled with his criticisms of European religious establishments, hints at the potential indirect influence of works like the *Mingxin baojian* on his perspectives, possibly through Jesuit translations and accounts of Chinese moral values. Voltaire extensively referenced Confucius in his writings, notably in the *Philosophical Dictionary* and *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, underscoring Chinese moral teachings as surpassing Western religious doctrines.

Though the *Mingxin baojian* did not receive the same level of translation as the Analects, its thematic parallels contributed significantly to the broader comprehension of Chinese ethics within Western academic circles. The presence of such materials facilitated comparative examinations between Eastern and Western ethical systems and philosophies, nurturing a deeper respect for cultural and intellectual diversity. Through the *Mingxin baojian's* content, European scholars gained direct access to Chinese ethical doctrines, providing them with valuable insights into the moral frameworks of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. This exposure both challenged and enriched the Western perspective on ethics and philosophy.

### 3.3 Contribution to Rise of Western Sinology

The early translation and transmission of *Mingxin baojian* exerted great influence on contributing to the rise of Western Sinology.

Followed Juan Cobo, Michele Ruggieri, retranslated *Mingxin baojian*. Besides, he translated *Four Books* into Latin which were later used by his successors, Jesuits such as João da Rocha (1565-1623) and Gaspar Ferreira (1571-1649). His translations into Spanish and Latin after returning to his homeland also directly influenced Matteo Ricci (1552-1610)'s translation efforts during the same period (Gao, 2021). Their translation had great impact on later translators and laid a good foundation for the rise of Western Sinology.

As Western Sinology evolved during the 18th and 19th centuries, works such as the *Mingxin baojian* laid the groundwork for studies in language and culture. During the 19th century, with the advancement of Sinology as an academic field in Europe, *Mingxin baojian* emerged as a pivotal text in the exploration of Chinese moral literature. English and French Sinologists, including James Legge (1815-1897) and Stanislas Julien (1797-1873), drew upon analogous Chinese manuals in their comparative examinations of Confucian moral principles. James Legge, a Scottish missionary and translator of Confucian and Daoist works, engaged in the translation of Chinese moral literature. Although Legge did not directly translate the *Mingxin baojian*, he made references to similar collections of moral teachings in his scholarly pursuits. Stanislas Julien, a French sinologist, delved into classical Chinese texts and their ethical doctrines, contributing to the broader comprehension of texts like the *Mingxin baojian*.

The translation and dissemination of the *Mingxin baojian* fostered the enlightenment of Sinology in the Western world, facilitating the transfer of insights into Chinese ethics and mindsets to a European audience. The successive translations of the text constituted a genuine sinological accomplishment.

## 4. Conclusion

Introduced to the West through Jesuit missionaries during the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, *Mingxin baojian* was recognized as a valuable repository of Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist ethical principles. By the 19th century, *Mingxin baojian* had become a significant component of academic Sinology, leaving its mark on scholars like James Legge and Stanislas Julien, who delved into Chinese moral literature. Employed in comparative philosophy, missionary education, and linguistic studies, the text reinforced its importance in cross-cultural interactions. Despite not receiving as extensive translation as the Confucian classics, its succinct style and universal ethical appeal rendered it an accessible gateway to Chinese ideologies. In essence, *Mingxin baojian* contributed to a deeper Western comprehension of Chinese ethics, governance, and philosophy, playing a pivotal role in bridging Eastern and Western intellectual traditions, enhancing Sinological research, and cultivating a more nuanced understanding of Chinese moral values in the global academic arena.

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