

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Sage King, the Enlightened Monarch, and the Russian Fatherland: Denis Fonvizin's Translation of *The Great Learning* in Eighteenth-Century Russia

Received: 05 December 2025; Revised: 22 June 2026; Published: 09 July 2026

Bingrui Cao

Shanghai International Studies University, China

Email: szcbr0115@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4796-8243>

Abstract:

This article examines Denis Fonvizin's 1779 Russian translation of *The Great Learning* as a case of cross-cultural conceptual mediation between Confucian ethics, Jesuit translation, Enlightenment political thought, and the emerging language of the Russian national consciousness. The article reconstructs the successive transformations of the text from Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian redaction to Abbé Pierre-Martial Cibot's French *Ta-Hio, ou la Grande Science* and finally to Fonvizin's Russian *Ta-Gio, or The Great Learning, Containing in Itself All of Chinese Philosophy*. It argues, first, that *The Great Learning* provided a moral-political structure linking self-cultivation, family order, rulership, and cosmic legitimacy; second, that Cibot recast this structure through the languages of natural theology, virtue governed by reason, social contract, and enlightened monarchy; and third, that Fonvizin inserted this mediated Confucian vocabulary into the political context of Catherinian Russia. In Fonvizin's hands, the Confucian sage king became a moral custodian of the Russian fatherland, a monarch whose legitimacy depended on his capacity for moral self-perfection and whose authority rested on providing the fatherland with a moral foundation through the cultivation of virtue, reason, and the pursuit of the common good. The article thus shows how even mistranslated or highly mediated knowledge of China could acquire real conceptual force in the formation of eighteenth-century Russian political thought.

Keywords: Denis Fonvizin; *The Great Learning*; Confucianism; Enlightenment Sinophilia; Russian enlightenment

1. Introduction

Denis Fonvizin was a figure of major importance in both the political and literary culture of Catherine II's Russia, and his work has been regarded as a crucial stage of the early formation of Russian national consciousness (Rogger, 1960, pp. 75-84). Best known today for his satirical plays and political writings, he also, rather unexpectedly, produced a Russian translation of the Confucian classic *The Great Learning* (Daxue 大学). Published anonymously in *Sankt-Peterburgskii vestnik* in May 1779



under the title *Ta-Gio, or The Great Learning, Containing in Itself All of Chinese Philosophy*¹ (*Ta-Gio, ili velikaia nauka, zakliuchaiushchaia v sebe vysokuiu kitaiskuiu filosofiiu*), this text marked one of the earliest Russian intellectual encounters with Confucian thought (Fonvizin, 1959, pp. 231–253; Raeff, 1966, pp. 87–105).

As current scholarship has shown, Fonvizin's version of *The Great Learning* was based on Abbé Pierre-Martial Cibot's French translation of Zhu Xi's redaction. (Raeff, 1960, p.88, n.1; Burson, 2005, pp. 90-92) Its publication belongs to a broader Enlightenment discourse in which China had already been idealized in Europe as a rational empire governed by philosopher kings, most famously by thinkers such as Leibniz and Voltaire. In France, Jesuit missionaries had by then introduced a substantial body of knowledge about China, making it a major topic of intellectual debate (Brown, 2020, pp. 243-261). In Russia, meanwhile, where elite culture remained deeply oriented toward Western Europe, Catherine II's well-known correspondence with Voltaire helped transmit Enlightenment Sinophilia into Russian aristocratic circles, largely at the level of courtly fashion rather than serious political or intellectual engagement (Lim, 2013, pp. 43-47). Fonvizin's *Ta-Gio*, however, stands apart from the more superficial forms of Russian *le rêve chinois*. It is one of the very few eighteenth-century Russian texts on China that was more than an expression of exotic fascination and can be situated within the histories of Russian political thought.

The distinctive character of this text has long been noted. Scholars working on Fonvizin frequently mention his translation of *The Great Learning*, briefly identify the French version on which it was based, and then treat it either as a politically motivated appropriation of Chinese material or as an allegorical text through which Fonvizin displaced his views onto a distant time and place in order to evade censorship, as Russian writers so often did (Gleason, 1985, pp.1-21). Yet *The Great Learning* was not simply a vehicle for Fonvizin's own ideas. Scholarship has too often lost sight of the fact that, however far the Russian version may diverge from it, the text ultimately derives from a classical Confucian source with its own conceptual logic and political vocabulary. The most suggestive study to date is Jeffrey Burson's, which argues that Fonvizin, finding German natural law discourse inadequate for articulating his ideas about political legitimacy, turned in part to an Eastern discourse for conceptual support. Because Burson's analysis emphasizes primarily the notion of *tianming* and political legitimacy, it leaves relatively unexplored the broader ethical architecture of *The Great Learning* itself and the precise ways in which German natural law and Confucian political vocabularies are brought into dialogue in *Ta-Gio*. (Burson, 2005, pp.77-102)

A full study of the translation history of this text has yet to appear. Few scholars have examined together the Chinese original, the French intermediary, and the final Russian version, or traced in detail how meaning shifted across these successive acts of mediation. This article seeks to fill this gap. By reconstructing this double mediation in its eighteenth-century context, it aims to show how the ancient

¹ In this article, I refer to Fonvizin's Russian translation as *Ta-Gio*, following the title under which it appeared in Russian («*Та-Гю, или великая наука, заключающая в себе высокую китайскую философию*»). Some English-language scholarship, following Marc Raeff's translation, refers to the text as *Ta Hsüeh*, a Wade-Giles rendering of *Daxue* 大学. Since the present article is concerned with Fonvizin's Russian text and its dependence on Abbé Cibot's French *Ta-Hio, ou la Grande Science*, I retain *Ta-Gio* when referring specifically to Fonvizin's version. This choice is based on the fact that Fonvizin's text is considerably closer to Cibot's *Ta-Hio* than to the Chinese original *Daxue* itself; using *Ta-Gio* therefore helps preserve the mediated character of the Russian translation. I use *The Great Learning* when referring to the Chinese classic *Daxue* more generally.



Chinese ideal of the sage king entered into dialogue with the Enlightenment ideal of the enlightened monarch, and finally became entangled with Fonvizin's conception of the fatherland.

To examine this process, this article is divided into three parts. The first examines *The Great Learning itself*, especially the Neo-Confucian version shaped by Zhu Xi and transmitted to eighteenth-century missionaries, with particular attention to its central ideas about virtuous government and the moral basis of monarchical legitimacy. The second turns to the French translation, reconstructing the context in which it was produced and analyzing Abbé Cibot's deliberate acts of translation and reinterpretation, through which Enlightenment elements were introduced into the text. The third focuses on Fonvizin's Russian *Ta-Gio*, situating it in its intellectual and political context and showing how Confucian discourse was brought into dialogue with the German natural law tradition and became part of an emerging language of Russian national consciousness.

2. Virtue, Mandate and Moral Order in *The Great Learning*

The Great Learning (*Daxue* 大学) was one of the most influential ethical texts in the later Confucian canon. Together with the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 论语), and *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子), it formed part of the *Four Books* (*Sishu* 四书), the textual core through which generations of Chinese educated elites came to understand Confucian moral and political thought. Although brief in length, it offered an elementary Confucian framework of the relationship between self-cultivation, family order, political rule, and the moral transformation of the world. It was therefore among the central Confucian writings encountered by eighteenth-century European missionaries in China. This section does not attempt to offer a comprehensive account of *The Great Learning*. Rather, it reconstructs the version of the text that entered eighteenth-century European translation and isolates the conceptual elements most important for its later reinterpretation: the Neo-Confucian structure of self-cultivation, the moral vocabulary of *ren*, *tian*, and *ming*, and the political ideal of the sage king. These elements would later be recast by Cibot and Fonvizin in the languages of Christian virtue, natural religion, and enlightened monarchy.

2.1 The textual history of *The Great Learning*

The Great Learning has a rather complex textual history, which is crucial for understanding its later translations. In its earliest form, it was preserved as a chapter of the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 礼记), a large ritual anthology compiled in the early imperial period. Although the *Book of Rites* as a whole became part of the authoritative classical canon during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), *The Great Learning*, along with another chapter, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, acquired its special status much later, above all through the editorial and interpretive work of Song Neo-Confucian thinkers (Eno, 2016, pp. 1–2). The Northern Song philosophers Cheng Hao (程颢) and Cheng Yi (程颐) regarded the ancient text as disordered and attempted to restore its coherence by rearranging portions of the text. Zhu Xi (朱熹) later built upon their work and produced the version that became authoritative. His intervention was not merely philological. By dividing the text into a short “classical text” (*jing* 经) and a sequence of ten “commentaries” (*zhuan* 传), Zhu Xi provided the text with an internal architecture, turning *The Great Learning* from a loose collection of platitudes to a tightly organized program of moral and political cultivation. (Eno, 2016, pp. 8–9; Zhu Xi, 2011, pp. 2–14).



This Neo-Confucian redaction is essential for the later French and Russian translations. Abbé Cibot's French translation, titled *Ta-Hio, ou la Grande Science*, was evidently based not on the unedited *Liji* version, but on Zhu Xi's redaction in his *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四书章句集注. Cibot retained the division between the main text and the explanatory commentaries, presenting the commentaries as nine sections instead of ten, omitting the passage where the original commentary was considered lost (Cibot, 1776, pp. 438-458; Raeff, 1966, pp. 88-105). Denis Fonvizin's Russian *Ta-Gio* in turn followed Cibot's French version closely, including its division into nine explanatory sections (Fonvizin, 1959, p.232-242). Fonvizin's preface also announced the hope of later providing a translation of the *Doctrine of the Mean*, though the project was never completed (Fonvizin, 1959, p.231).

2.2 The moral architecture of *The Great Learning*

After Zhu Xi, *The Great Learning* should be considered not as an isolated ancient fragment, but rather, as a text that was shaped by later Confucian thoughts and therefore deserves to be considered within this tradition. As the beginning of the *Four Books* and an entry into Confucian learning, it condenses one of the central assumptions of the Mencian-Confucian tradition: human beings possess an innate moral capacity, and the task of learning is to cultivate this moral potential; that human beings can and should be morally perfected (Eno, 2016, pp. 1–2, 7–8). Robert Eno describes *The Great Learning* as a kind of “self-help manual” for ethical cultivation, for it offers a practical training program (Eno, 2016, p. 7). Yet, although the text famously declares that “from the Son of Heaven to the common person, all must take self-cultivation as the root”²(*zi Tianzi yi zhi yu shuren, yi shi jie yi xiushen wei ben* 自天子以至于庶人，壹是皆以修身为本), its intended subject is not “the people” in a modern egalitarian sense. Its practical audience was the literati, *junzi* 君子, in other words, the educated elites who aspired to govern (Zhu Xi, 2011, p. 5).

The ethical project of *The Great Learning* is inseparable from its political aspect, bringing together private morality and public order. Central to this program is the sequence of perfecting the self (*xiushen* 修身), ordering the family (*qijia* 齐家), ruling the state (*zhiguo* 治国), and finally bringing peace to all under heaven (*ping tianxia* 平天下) (Zhu Xi, 2011, p. 5; Eno, 2016, pp. 11–12). The individual, the family and the state are presented as continuous moral fields, where political order rests fundamentally on moral condition. Virtue, therefore, is a decisive political power.

2.3 *Ren*, *Tian*, and *Ming*: The vocabulary of rulership

Three concepts are especially important for understanding how this framework was later translated and reinterpreted: *ren* 仁, *tian* 天, and *ming* 命. *Ren* may be taken as the key expression of Confucian virtue; *tian* provides the language of transcendent power or cosmic order; and *ming* links moral rule to mandate, decree, and legitimacy. Together, they form the conceptual vocabulary through which *The Great Learning* articulates the moral basis of rulership.

² Unless otherwise indicated, translations from *The Great Learning* are adapted from Robert Eno's open-access translation, *The Great Learning and The Doctrine of the Mean: Translation, Commentary, and Notes* (2016). I have modified Eno's renderings in several places in order to retain terms and conceptual distinctions central to this article. The Chinese text is cited according to Zhu Xi's *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四书章句集注.



The concept of *ren* 仁 stands at the very heart of early Confucian moral philosophy. Often translated as “benevolence” or “humanity”, *ren* defies simple equivalence in Western languages. It is best understood as an ethical ideal that centers on the moral cultivation of the self in relation to others. In the *Analects*, Confucius repeatedly elevates *ren* as the defining quality of the *junzi* 君子. He associates it with love, courage, self-discipline, and sincerity (*Analects* 12.22; 14.4; 12.1; 1.3), but consistently resists reducing it to a rigid formula. Rather than a fixed doctrine, *ren* is a dynamic moral orientation, which manifests itself in the practice of *li* 礼, ritual propriety which embodies political order. (Wong, 2024, §2.2). Later Confucians elaborated on this foundation. In Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucian synthesis, *ren* becomes metaphysical—the principle of life itself, the embodiment of cosmic moral order—and thus the unifying source of the virtues (Chan, 1963, pp. 589–591). In *The Great Learning* as transmitted in Zhu Xi’s *Si shu zhangju jizhu*, the term appears only a few times, but each instance pertains directly to rulership: “When acting as a ruler of men, come to rest in *ren*.” (为人君，止于仁); “When a single family practices *ren*, *ren* arises throughout the state.” (一家仁，一国兴仁); “Yao and Shun led the world with *ren*” (尧、舜帅天下以仁) (Zhu Xi, 2011, pp. 5, 9). In this context, *ren* is presented as the highest standard for sovereign conduct and the foundation of just political order. The openness of the concept would later make it simultaneously translatable and untranslatable in foreign contexts, enabling Enlightenment thinkers to appropriate and transform *ren* within fundamentally different cultural frameworks (Yang, 2024; Meynard, 2015).

Following *ren*, the concepts of *tian* 天 and *ming* 命 further define the basis of rulership in *The Great Learning*. Although Jeffrey Burson treats *tianming* 天命, the Mandate of Heaven, primarily as a single concept, it is useful first to separate its two components (Burson, 2005). *Tian* 天, although usually rendered as “God” or “Heaven,” is fundamentally different from the Christian God. Its meaning moves between sky, high deity, moral authority and cosmic order. In the Neo-Confucian context, *tian* is best understood as the impersonal moral-cosmic order, much like the Western idea of “Nature”. In later Confucian texts, especially those associated with the Mencian tradition, *tian* is at the same time the source of innate moral capacities, and the horizon before which moral conduct is to be judged. (Perkins, 2023, §2) The closely related concept of *ming* refers to that which is assigned, ordained, or commanded by *tian*, combining in itself the meanings of “mandate,” “decree,” “fate,” and “destiny”. *Ming* designates the way in which Heaven’s moral order becomes effective in the human world, and to follow the *ming* is to cultivate Heaven-given moral capacities. (Chan, 1963, pp.3-4) In early Zhou political thought, the doctrine of *tianming*, the Mandate of Heaven, served to justify the Zhou conquest of its previous dynasty Shang as the transfer of Heaven’s mandate from a corrupt dynasty to a virtuous one (Angle, 2022, §1). Unlike the European doctrine of the divine right of kings, the Mandate of Heaven was never unconditional. It could be gained through virtue and lost through tyranny or failure to care for the people. In later Confucian thought, the question was no longer only whether Heaven had granted a dynasty the right to rule, but whether the ruler’s conduct visibly manifested Heaven’s moral order (Csikszentmihalyi, 2024, §5).

Concepts of *tianming* and *ren* together form a language of political legitimacy: political conduct that manifests the quality of *ren*, such as ritual propriety, filial piety and humane government, serves as practical signs through which the mandate could be recognized. In *The Great Learning* as transmitted through Zhu Xi’s *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, this political doctrine is combined with a theory of moral perfection. The text cites the phrase “the bright mandate of Heaven” (*tian zhi mingming* 天之明命),



which Zhu Xi glosses as “that which Heaven gives to us, and by which we possess virtue” (天之所以与我，而我之所以为德者也)(Zhu Xi, 2011, p.5). To “make bright virtue brilliant” (*ming mingde* 明明德) is therefore to recover and manifest what Heaven has already endowed in the human person (Zhu Xi, 2011, p.4).

2.4 The sage king and conditional legitimacy

In classical Chinese political philosophy, the ideal ruler is envisioned as a sage king, a monarch who exercises political authority while holding himself to the ethical standards of a sage. Historical figures mentioned in *The Great Learning*, such as Yao and Shun, illustrate this ideal: their exceptional virtue enabled them to receive the Mandate of Heaven, thereby justifying the removal of corrupt rulers and the restoration of social and political order. It is important, however, to note that while this framework allows for the possibility of a ruler’s removal, it should not be understood as endorsing popular revolution in the modern sense. In classical Confucian thought, legitimacy does not originate directly from the people as a sovereign collective. As El Amine emphasizes, the well-being of the common people serves mainly as observable evidence of the ruler’s virtue (El Amine, 2015, pp.30-61). From a Neo-Confucian perspective, the eight steps of self-cultivation outlined in *The Great Learning*—*gewu* (格物), *zhizhi* (致知), *chengyi* (诚意), *zhengxin* (正心), *xiushen* (修身), *qijia* (齐家), *zhiguo* (治国), and *pingtianxia* (平天下)—should not be read as a linear path for a common individual to ascend to rulership (Zhu Xi, 2011, pp. 5). Rather, these stages are mutually reinforcing: personal cultivation, family regulation, and state governance are interdependent and inseparable. Within this integrated vision of family and state, both ordinary subjects and rulers cultivate virtue ultimately to ensure political stability and the effective functioning of governance.

2.5 Conceptual flexibility and the possibility of translation

In sum, even in China, *The Great Learning* has been continuously reinterpreted and reconfigured over many generations. Many of its key concepts bear superficial resemblance to Western notions, yet their meanings are often intentionally ambiguous. This conceptual flexibility created considerable interpretive space for European missionaries who approached Chinese classics with specific intellectual and religious purposes (Meynard, 2015; Brown, 2020). Although Cibot’s French translation diverges significantly from the original text, it was not an arbitrary distortion; rather, it strategically drew upon the ethical and political dimensions already embedded in the *Daxue*: discussions of virtue, questions of political legitimacy, the relationship between ruler and ruled, and analogies between the sovereign and the father (Cibot, 1776, pp. 438-458). In this process, *tian*, a concept roughly analogous to “Nature,” was interpreted as the proof of ancient Chinese natural religion; discussions of *ren* and moral virtue were sometimes rendered in the sense of Christian ethical ideals, and at other times reframed in terms of Enlightenment notions of reason. Similarly, the Chinese idea of the “sage king” was seamlessly adapted into the Western concept of the “philosopher king” or the “enlightened monarch,” allowing the text to resonate with European intellectual frameworks.



3. Abbé Cibot's *Ta-Hio*: Recasting the Confucian Sage King as an Enlightened Monarch

Abbé Pierre-Martial Cibot's translation appeared as "*Ta-Hio, ou la Grande Science*" in the first volume of *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les mœurs, les usages, &c. des Chinois: par les missionnaires de Pékin*, published in 1776 (Cibot, 1776, pp. 438-458). Before examining this translation, it is important to situate the text within its historical and intellectual milieu. This section proceeds from context to textual analysis. It first situates Cibot's translation within Enlightenment Sinophilia and the Jesuit construction of Confucian China, before turning to the *Mémoires concernant les Chinois* as the immediate milieu in which the translation appeared. It then examines Cibot's rendering of *The Great Learning*, arguing that he transformed the Confucian language of self-cultivation, Heaven, mandate, and virtue into a hybrid vocabulary of natural theology, virtue governed by reason, and moral obligation. In doing so, Cibot recast the Confucian sage king as an enlightened monarch and created the conceptual intermediary through which the text could later enter Fonvizin's political imagination.

3.1 Enlightenment Sinophilia and the Jesuit construction of Confucian China

From the late sixteenth-century onward, Jesuit missionaries sent to China began transmitting knowledge of Chinese society and thought back to Europe. Their primary mission was the conversion of China to Catholicism, which required a deep engagement with local culture. To make Christianity intelligible to Chinese audiences, the missionaries studied the Chinese language, customs, and classical texts. (Rowbotham, 1945, pp. 224–237) Confucian works were translated into Latin, primarily to educate fellow missionaries. (Ross, 1994, pp. 142–154.) These translations were carefully crafted to identify traces of a primitive notion of God within Confucian texts, and to establish a synthesis between Christian theology and Confucian ethics. In effect, the Jesuits created a version of Confucianism that served their own religious purposes. (Brown, 2020, p. 4) By the seventeenth-century, as the Jesuit version of Confucian texts began circulating in Europe, European intellectuals encountered an idealized China, portrayed as a rational, orderly, and morally sophisticated civilization. As the intellectual historian Jonathan Israel describes it, China played the role of a "philosophical thought experiment" (Israel, 2006, p. 655), striking the Europeans by seeming to show the apparent ability of developing coherent ethical principles without divine revelation.

The Jesuit translations often rendered key concepts with remarkable precision, yet this accuracy was often employed to map Chinese philosophical concepts onto European intellectual frameworks. The profound influence of these translations is evident in the work of prominent Enlightenment Sinophiles. The German Lutheran philosopher, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), for example, was well-read in Jesuit translations of Confucian texts (Lach, 1945, pp. 436). In the preface of his book on China, *Novissima Sinica* (News from China), he considered Confucianism as an expression of universal natural religion, rooted in reason and observable in the ethical norms of Confucian society (Leibniz, 1697/1994, pp. 45–60). Another leading figure of the Enlightenment, Voltaire (1694–1778), understood China in a similar way. He depicted Chinese emperors as philosopher-kings and interpreted Confucianism as a rational ethical system, where social order was maintained through the internal moral law rather than belief in a personal God. (Rowbotham, 1932, pp. 1050–65.) Both Leibniz and Voltaire maintained that the Chinese had a conception of one true God, represented in a rather intuitive



way. However, another German philosopher, Christian Wolff, pushed the argument further. In 1721, Wolff suggested during a public lecture that China demonstrated the possibility of a highly developed civilization sustained without either natural or revealed religion, and that Chinese moral culture relied on the cultivation of reason rather than divine sanction or posthumous reward—a claim that provoked controversy and led to his expulsion from Prussia. (Lach, 1953, pp.561-74) In his later work on Chinese philosophy *De rege philosophante et philosopho regnante (On the Philosopher King and the Ruling Philosopher)* (1730), he also saw the ancient Chinese emperors as enlightened monarchs, who ruled in the name of reason (Wolff, 1730/1992).

By the time of the publication of *Memoire concernant les Chinois*, however, China had ceased to occupy the central stage of European intellectual debate (Statman, 2023, pp.21-24). As Stewart J. Brown argues, European interest was largely framed by the perception of China as a moral society independent of Christian influence; by the late eighteenth-century, the idea that Christian revelation was the only foundation of an ethical society had begun to wane, and enthusiasm for China diminished correspondingly. (Brown, 2020, p.22) Nonetheless, the extensive body of Sinological material accumulated over the previous century continued to be published and defended, and a scholarly engagement with Chinese culture was sustained, as the *Mémoires* themselves demonstrate.

3.2 The *Mémoires concernant les Chinois* and Cibot's translational milieu

The *Mémoires concernant les Chinois*, comprising sixteen volumes and published between 1776 and 1814, constituted a large-scale intellectual enterprise (Dehergne, 1983, pp. 267-71). It was not a missionary text intended solely for internal Jesuit circulation, but rather involved and was addressed to a broader scholarly and administrative milieu in Europe that had a sustained interest in China. The *Mémoires* took shape as a vast compilation of the legacy of the Jesuit mission in China: multi-authored, encyclopedic in scope, and highly heterogeneous in content. Compared with Jean-Baptiste Du Halde's monumental work *Description de l'empire de la Chine* (1735), however, the *Mémoires* were more fragmentary and miscellaneously arranged, almost attempting to gather together every available form of knowledge about China, including not only Confucian classics and religious questions, but also studies of language and writing, agriculture, technology, and a considerable body of correspondence. (Dehergne, 1983, p. 267) After Fonvizin's first attempt, parts of the *Mémoires* were translated into Russian and, along with Du Halde's work, became arguably the most important textual sources through which eighteenth-century Russia acquired knowledge of China (Maggs, 2016, p. 114).

As Dehergne observes, the *Mémoires* sought to answer the questions about China that most interested contemporary Europeans; these were, significantly, questions framed in comparison with the Bible and Christian civilization. (Dehergne, 1983, p.272) In his discussion of Cibot, Dehergne describes him as a “partisan du figurisme” (Dehergne, 1983, p.273), that is, as someone inclined toward a mystical interpretation of Chinese culture in order to demonstrate that the earliest Chinese had once possessed knowledge of Christianity. Elsewhere, Dehergne remarks that Cibot, the most prolific contributor to the collection, ends up annoying the reader with his endless digressions (“finit par agacer le lecteur par ses interminables digressions”, Dehergne, 1983, p.268). As the following analysis will show, Cibot's treatment of *The Great Learning* confirms this impression. He was by no means a neutral translator of the Chinese classics; rather, he introduced a series of adaptations that reshaped the ethical and political language of the text.



3.3 Cibot's rewriting of *The Great Learning*

Cibot's translation reshaped *The Great Learning* in three interrelated ways. First, he recast the metaphysical foundation of Confucian thought: the Confucian structure of "Heaven–Mandate–Virtue" (*tian-ming-de/ren* 天—命—德/仁) was transformed into a Christian natural-theological structure of "the sovereign good–natural law–rational knowledge." Secondly, he interpreted the moral ideal of *ren* 仁 as a form of virtue governed by reason within European Enlightenment ethics, and made "the prince" the primary subject of this moral demand. Thirdly, he reshaped the political language of the text, turning Confucian ethical relations into relations of obligation and contract, thus assimilating them to the European language of legitimacy. While the Confucian analogy between family and state was not wholly effaced, it was reframed as paternal monarchy, a model readily intelligible to eighteenth-century European readers. In this way, the Confucian sage king was rewritten as an enlightened monarch.

The first layer of rewriting concerns the Christianization of metaphysics and epistemology. This transformation alters the ultimate orientation of *The Great Learning*. The original text opens with the famous sentence:

大学之道，在明明德，在亲民，在止于至善。(Zhu Xi, 2011, p. 4)

The Dao of Great Learning lies in making bright virtue brilliant; in making the people new; in coming to rest at the limit of the good. (Eno, 2016, p.11)

Cibot's Translation:

La vraie sagesse consiste à éclairer son esprit et à purifier son cœur ; à aimer les hommes et à leur faire aimer la vertu ; à franchir tout obstacle pour s'unir au souverain bien, et à ne s'attacher qu'à lui.³ (Cibot, 1776, p.436)

True wisdom consists in enlightening the mind and purifying the heart; in loving mankind and leading them to love virtue; in overcoming every obstacle in order to unite oneself with the sovereign good, and in attaching oneself to it alone.⁴

In the Confucian context, *zhishan* 至善 denotes the highest ethical condition to be attained through moral cultivation and practical self-transformation. Cibot, however, renders it as "*le souverain bien*", a vocabulary that resonates strongly with platonic conceptions of the highest good. Furthermore, in his rendering of *tian zhi mingming* 天之明命 as "*la loi lumineuse du Tien*" (Cibot, 1776, p. 439), *ming* 命 is not understood as "mandate," but as "law." This shift is significant, for it transforms the Confucian idea of the Mandate of Heaven into a universal and intelligible law.

The epistemological concept of *gewu zhizhi* 格物致知, is reshaped in a similar way. This concept originally refers to the extension of knowledge through the investigation of the principles inherent in things, a process ultimately directed toward moral self-cultivation. Cibot rewrites this process as follows:

³ For ease of reading, I have modernized Cibot's eighteenth-century French spelling in quotations.

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations of Cibot's French rendering of *The Great Learning* are mine.

...il remontait par le raisonnement jusqu'à la première origine et à la dernière fin de toutes les créatures, et s'en formait une idée claire. (Cibot, 1776, p.437)

He ascended by reasoning to the first origin and the final end of all creatures, and formed a clear idea of it.

Three points are worth noting here. First, Cibot transforms the act of investigation (*ge* 格) into *par le raisonnement*, that is, into an act of rational inference. In this way, Confucian moral cultivation is recast as a rational-philosophical activity. Secondly, he translates *wu* 物 as *créatures*. This is not a neutral equivalent such as “things” or objects, but a term already marked by the Christian doctrine of creation. The world is thus placed within the ontological structure of Creator and creatures. Thirdly, Cibot interprets *zhizhi* 致知 as an ascent toward *la première origine* and *la dernière fin*, that is, toward the first origin and final end of all creatures. Taken together, this formulation comes very close to the logic of Christian natural theology: through reason, the human mind contemplates the created world and ascends from it to its first cause and ultimate purpose. In these ways, Cibot recasts the Confucian structure of “Heaven–Mandate–Virtue” into a Christian natural-theological structure of “the sovereign good–natural law–rational knowledge.”

The second layer of rewriting lies in Cibot's transformation of the subject of moral cultivation in *The Great Learning*. In the original text, the practical chain leads from personal cultivation to political order. Although this chain ultimately bears upon monarchical government, its principle does not apply exclusively to the ruler. Self-cultivation is both the political foundation of rulership and a shared ethical requirement for all moral subjects. Cibot's French translation significantly alters this structure. Upon rewriting *gewu zhizhi* 格物致知 as a movement of reason, he concentrates the subject of this rational movement in the figure of the *prince, roi, empereur, or souverain*. In this sense, the ethics of self-cultivation in *The Great Learning* is reinterpreted as a form of princely self-government: the ruler must first govern his own mind, desires, passions, and judgment before he can govern the state.

Cibot's rendering of *ming mingde* 明明德 in the opening sentence clearly illustrates this shift. In *The Great Learning*, the phrase refers to the manifestation of the bright virtue originally inherent in the person, which then serves as the basis of ethical practice and political government. Cibot translates the opening occurrence of *ming mingde* as *éclairer son esprit et purifier son cœur*, dividing it into two European moral categories: *esprit* and *cœur*. The former refers to intellect, spirit, or the faculty of thought; the latter to the heart, moral feeling, or inner disposition. Correspondingly, the verb *ming* 明 is rendered as *éclairer* — to enlighten, a term that easily resonates with the vocabulary of rational enlightenment. At the same time, *purifier son cœur* retains a distinctly Christian language of moral purification. This way, the moral ideal acquires the meaning of virtue governed by reason.

Later in the text, Cibot changes the addressee of the practice of *ming mingde*. The Chinese text states:

古之欲明明德于天下者，先治其国。(Zhu Xi, 2011, p.5)

In ancient times, those who wished to make bright virtue brilliant in the world first ordered their states. (Eno, 2016, p.12)

Un prince qui voulait conquérir tout l'Empire à l'innocence et la vérité, s'appliquait d'abord à bien gouverner ses États. (Cibot, 1776, p.437)



A prince who wished to bring the whole Empire under the rule of innocence and truth first applied himself to governing his states well.

While this statement is originally meant as a general moral principle, Cibot adds to it an acting subject: *Un prince*. In the following sequence, the steps of governing the state, ordering the household, regulating personal conduct, correcting the inclinations, fixing the thoughts, and reasoning back to the first origin and final end are all continued through the pronoun *il*. The result is that the Confucian practice of self-cultivation is concentrated in the monarch and becomes an ethical technique of princely self-government.

The third layer of rewriting lies in Cibot's political recoding of Confucian virtue ethics. Throughout his translation, he repeatedly employed terms like *loi* (law), *devoir* (duty), *traité* (treaty) and *justice*. As a result, the *Ta-Hio* comes to resemble a discourse of contractual obligation. A telling example is the passage:

为人君，止于仁；为人臣，止于敬；为人子，止于孝；为人父，止于慈；与国人交，止于信。

When acting as a ruler of men, come to rest in humanity. When acting as a subject of a ruler, come to rest in reverence. When acting as a man's son, come to rest in filiality. When acting as a son's father, come to rest in kindness. When interacting with men of your state, come to rest in faithfulness. (Eno, 2016, p.15)

Cibot translates it as follows:

Comme roi, il s'appliquait à procurer le bonheur de ses peuples; comme sujet, à respecter son souverain; comme fils, à honorer ses illustres parents; comme père, à témoigner sa tendresse à ses enfants; et comme allié enfin, à garder fidèlement tous les traités. (Cibot, 1776, p.441)

As king, he devoted himself to securing the happiness of his peoples; as subject, to respecting his sovereign; as son, to honoring his illustrious parents; as father, to showing tenderness to his children; and finally, as ally, to faithfully observing all treaties.

The most revealing change concerns *yu guoren jiao, zhiyu xin* 与国人交，止于信. In the original text, *xin* 信 denotes trustworthiness or sincerity in human relations. By introducing *allié* and *traités*, Cibot translates everyday trust into fidelity between allies. Once this contractual vocabulary enters the text, the ruler's relation to the people also acquires a quasi-contractual form. *Wei renchen, zhiyu jing* 为人臣，止于敬 becomes the subject's recognition of the sovereign, while *wei renjun, zhiyu ren* 为人君，止于仁 is rendered as the ruler's duty to pursue the happiness of his people. The relationship between ruler and subject is thus made to resemble the political bond imagined in theories of social contract and enlightened monarchy: the people owe obedience to the sovereign, while the sovereign derives legitimacy from his obligation to promote their welfare.

In sum, in the three ways stated above, Cibot transformed the Confucian ideal of the sage king. As a person, he is no longer a Confucian *junzi*, but a natural-theological subject who comes to know the "first origin" and the "final end" through a movement of reason. As a ruler, he is enlightened by reason, constrained by virtue, and directed toward the welfare of the people as the end of government; his

authority, in turn, must be justified through natural law, political obligation and public welfare. The sage king thus becomes an enlightened monarch in the European eighteenth-century sense.

3.4 A hybrid language for Denis Fonvizin

Cibot's version of *The Great Learning* comes to resemble a text of monarchical admonition. Whether or not Cibot himself intended to admonish the rulers of his own time, his translation produced a remarkable hybrid language. To a certain extent, it preserved the Confucian demand for the ruler's moral cultivation while recasting that virtue in Enlightenment terms; it retained the legitimating force of the Mandate of Heaven while relocating it within the conceptual horizon of natural religion. In contemporary Europe, the traditional doctrine of divine right monarchy could provide a sacred source for royal authority, while social contract theory and natural law could address political legitimacy and the obligations of subjects. Yet these languages did not always organize the ruler's self-cultivation, family order, state governance, and political legitimacy into a continuous ethical-political chain in the way *The Great Learning* did. Nor did they offer, in quite the same manner as the Confucian idea of the Mandate of Heaven, the possibility that an immoral ruler might forfeit his legitimacy. It was precisely this hybrid language that attracted Denis Fonvizin, a writer undergoing his own intellectual transition and urgently concerned with the admonition of an empress. In his hands, Cibot's version of *The Great Learning* became a conceptual resource for thinking about monarchy, political legitimacy, and the Russian fatherland (Burson, 2005).

4. Denis Fonvizin's Ta-Gio and the Moral Custodian of the Russian Fatherland

While the Jesuits approached Confucian texts primarily to prove that China possessed a form of natural religion, Denis Fonvizin found in them a different kind of resource. The Jesuit-mediated image of China did not enter Russia as a merely exotic curiosity; in Fonvizin's hands, it was transformed into a discourse that could be drawn into the concrete political language of Catherinian Russia. This section argues that Fonvizin's *Ta-Gio* should be read as part of his broader attempt to imagine a moral foundation for the Russian fatherland.

The section examines the political context of Catherine II's reign, especially the collapse of early expectations that the empress would govern as an enlightened monarch bound by fundamental laws. It then turns to the German natural law tradition that shaped Fonvizin's intellectual formation, showing how Pufendorf and Wolff supplied him with a language of state, sovereignty, obligation, and moral perfection, but offered only limited resources for conceptualizing the moral bond between ruler and ruled. Against this background, the following section examines how Fonvizin's *Ta-Gio* served to supplement this legal-political vocabulary. The Confucian text, which was already transformed by Cibot, allowed Fonvizin to recast the monarch not merely as the bearer of sovereign authority, but as the moral custodian of the fatherland.

4.1 Denis Fonvizin in the political context of Catherinian Russia

Fonvizin and the circle to which he belonged—the reform-minded group associated with Nikita Panin—represented a generation of intellectuals and officials who had initially invested hopes in Catherine II's accession (Ransel, 1975, pp. 73-75). In the early years of her reign, Catherine sought to



present herself as an enlightened monarch who would replace the arbitrariness associated with Peter III's rule with government by reason, law, and public welfare. The German-born empress followed European cultural fashions closely and was fully aware of the Enlightenment fascination with China. Her celebrated correspondence with Voltaire gave her access to one of the most influential European images of China as a rational and morally ordered empire (Lim, 2013, pp. 43-45). As Lim puts it, Catherine II's reign represented the peak of eighteenth-century chinoiserie in Russia (Lim, 2013, p.42). Catherine not only displayed an interest in Chinese-style decoration and architecture but even created an image of a Chinese benevolent tsar in an Oriental tale, *Tale of Tsarevich Fevei (Skazka o tsareviche Fevee, 1783)*, written to educate her grandsons. (Maggs, 1984, pp.81-113; Lim, 2013, pp. 45-47, 53-56). China, then, had already acquired a certain political significance as a symbol in Catherinian Russia, even if this significance remained largely superficial and aestheticized.

Catherine's self-fashioning coincided with the political expectations of the Panin party, Fonvizin among them (Ransel, 1975, pp. 73-75). As Walter Gleason has shown, Soviet scholars such as G. Makogonenko interpreted the political writings of Fonvizin and other critics as early evidence of a Russian "constitutional" movement, comparable in ambition—though not in institutional form—to the movements of mid-seventeenth-century England and late eighteenth-century France. Their goal was to compel Catherine to accept "fundamental laws" that would limit the arbitrary exercise of monarchical power (Makogonenko, 1961; Gleason, 1975, p. 560). The hopes attached to Catherine's early reign, however, gradually collapsed as Catherine became increasingly suspicious of any project that might restrict her power, especially after the Pugachev rebellion of 1773-1775 (Ransel, 1975, pp. 216-218). Her reliance on favorites, who appeared to exercise political influence, further deepened the dissatisfaction of statesmen (Ransel, 1975, p. 165). Despite the disappointment, the Panin party insisted on its reformist ideal: in the early 1780s it made a final, unsuccessful attempt to present Catherine with a set of fundamental laws for the Russian monarchy (Burson, 2005, p. 93).

It is against this background that Fonvizin's translation of *The Great Learning*, the *Ta-Gio*, published in 1779, must be read (Fonvizin, 1984, pp.231-253). The translation was part of the search for a moral and legal language with which to admonish and at the same time implicitly criticize the empress (Burson, 2005, pp.92-93). Marc Raeff includes Fonvizin's *Ta-Gio* and his *Discourse on the Permanent Laws of State* in *Russian Intellectual History: An Anthology* (Raeff, 1966, pp. 88-105). Recent scholarship has read *Ta-Gio* and his *Discourse* as closely related texts: the former supplied a utopian vocabulary of virtuous rulership, blended with conditional legitimacy, while the latter articulated more directly the political demand for a monarchy bound by permanent laws (Gleason, 1985, Introduction, sec. C). Together, they brought the Confucian language into the political concerns under Catherine II.

The textual route through which Fonvizin encountered *The Great Learning* can be reconstructed with some confidence. During his stay in France in 1777-1778, the first volumes of the *Mémoires concernant les Chinois* had already appeared, and Cibot's French translation of the *Ta-Hio* had been published in the first volume (Burson, 2005, pp.91-92; Cibot, 1776, pp. 438-458). As Burson notes, Jacques Proust, one of the editors and commentators of Fonvizin's French correspondence, confirms that Fonvizin encountered Cibot's translation during this period. (Burson, 2005, p.91; Raeff, 1966, p. 88 n.) Although Fonvizin's surviving letters from France contain no explicit reference to the *Ta-Hio*, the historical circumstances make such an encounter highly plausible: the *Mémoires* were in circulation, and the broader controversy surrounding China formed part of the intellectual atmosphere that Fonvizin



would easily have encountered in France. Moreover, the apparent verbal and structural correspondence between the two translations leaves little doubt that Fonvizin relied on Cibot's French rendering, following its title, division of the text, vocabulary, transliteration of Chinese names, and several rhetorical embellishments that do not appear in the original text (Cibot, 1776, pp. 438-458; Fonvizin, 1984, pp. 231-253).

The question, then, is what intellectual gap Fonvizin encountered when he came to the *Ta-Hio*. This study argues that this gap concerned the emerging problem of national consciousness: while the language of German Enlightenment provided a framework for thinking about state authority and legal obligation, it offered fewer resources for conceptualizing the moral and emotional bonds that could unite ruler and the ruled. As Hans Rogger states, although fully developed Russian nationalism came into being only in the nineteenth-century, many of its first ingredients were already taking shape in the eighteenth-century (Rogger, 1960, pp.6-7), one of them the idea of the fatherland (*otechestvo*). Gleason identifies Fonvizin's particular contribution in his effort to distinguish the fatherland from the state: the latter referred to the formal apparatus of rule, whereas the former named a still-imprecise moral and national ideal. (Gleason, 1985, pp.1-21) This distinction reveals a tension within Fonvizin's political thought: although trained in the language of German Enlightenment, he came to perceive the bond between ruler and subjects as "emotional and instinctual rather than rational and contractual" (Gleason, 1975, pp.560-562; Gleason, 1985, sec.C). Burson elaborated on this basis, explaining why the Confucian text mattered in this development. Burson is especially persuasive in showing how the idea of *tianming*, or the Mandate of Heaven, could make Fonvizin's *Ta-Gio* appear to justify the deposition of a ruler who failed his duties, which potentially justifies the Panin party's support for the Crown Prince Paul instead of Catherine. (Burson, 2005, 77-102) The present article, however, does not pursue this revolutionary potential further; rather, it seeks to explore the subtler and previously unexplored aspects of the *Ta-Gio*. Apart from the doctrine of Mandate of Heaven, Fonvizin also incorporated elements of Chinese moral philosophy preserved in Cibot's version of *The Great Learning*, including the concept of family-state homology and the "*tian-ming-ren*" (Heaven-Mandate-Virtue) structure filtered through an Enlightenment lens.

4.2 German natural law and the limits of legal-political obligation

Fonvizin's early intellectual formation took place within an intellectual environment strongly influenced by the German natural law tradition, a background that provides an essential point of departure for understanding his later political thought. Walter Gleason has offered the most detailed account of Fonvizin's early intellectual formation. As Gleason puts it, Fonvizin and many of Catherine II's critics did not emerge from a vaguely defined intellectual milieu dominated primarily by the French Enlightenment. Rather, the education they received in the late 1750s and early 1760s was strongly influenced by the German Enlightenment. (Gleason, 1975, pp.561-563). Fonvizin entered the Noble Boarding School of Moscow University in 1755 and remained there until 1762. At the time, Moscow University was still a small institution, where close contact between professors and students allowed the faculty to exert a sustained and direct influence on the young nobility. Many of these professors had been appointed on the recommendation of Gerhard Friedrich Müller, the Leipzig-trained historian and academician. Coming from major centers of the German Enlightenment, they were familiar with the writings of leading German natural law theorists, particularly Samuel Pufendorf and Christian Wolff. Fonvizin's first systematic encounter with European Enlightenment thought thus took place



within an institutional setting deeply informed by the German natural law tradition represented by Pufendorf and Wolff. (Gleason, 1975, pp.561-563).

German natural law was far from a monolithic tradition. Pufendorf and Wolff offered two interconnected yet distinct political languages. Pufendorf's theory aligned more closely with an absolutist conception of natural law. Drawing upon and transforming Hobbes's notion of the commonwealth as an "artificial man", he understood the state as a moral person (*persona moralis*) (Hobbes, 1651, Introduction, pp.8-9; Pufendorf, 1991, bk. 2, ch. 6, §§10–11; Behme, 2009, xi). He generally rejected a separation of powers, insisting that sovereignty must remain unified and, in a monarchy, vested exclusively in the monarch (Pufendorf, 1991, bk. 2, ch. 6, §§10–11; Seidler, 2021, §4.2.4). Crucially, in *On the Duty of Man and Citizen According to Natural Law* (*De Jure Naturae et Gentium*), Pufendorf emphasized that the state is an artificial persona constituted by the united wills of many individuals, with its "own special rights and property, which no one man, no multitude of men, nor even all men together, may appropriate apart from him who holds the sovereign power or to whom the government of the state has been committed." (Pufendorf, 1991, §§10–11; Behme, 2009, xi). While Pufendorf did not stress absolute authorization in the Hobbesian sense, he similarly held that the unity of the state derives from the unity of its persona rather than the individual qualities of the ruler (Pufendorf, 1991, bk. 2, ch. 6, §§10–11; Seidler, 2021, §4.2). Accordingly, in a monarchy, the monarch's significance lies primarily in serving as the representative and bearer of the state's will: the moral person refers to the state as an abstract political entity, not to the personal virtues, intelligence, or charisma of the monarch. In this way, Pufendorf provided Fonvizin with an institutional language for understanding state unity: the state acts as a coherent moral person, and the monarch is simply the representative organ of that abstract persona (Pufendorf, 1991, bk. 2, ch. 6, §§10–11). This framework explains why the state can function as a unified actor and why subjects owe it strong obligations of obedience. Yet its limitations are evident: it foregrounds the locus of sovereignty, the unity of political authority, and the duty of subjects, but devotes less attention to the ruler's moral qualities and the way the personal will of the monarch translates into tangible political consequences.

By contrast, Wolff offered Fonvizin a more expansive conceptual language. Whereas Pufendorf's natural law theory foregrounded the juridical structure of sovereignty, Wolff linked political authority to the moral ends of the community. In his mature system, individuals are rationally obliged to pursue perfection, both in themselves and in others; the state is therefore legitimate not merely because it secures order, but because it creates the conditions for moral and rational improvement (Wolff, 1720/2024, §§42–45, pp. 31–32; Walschots, 2024, pp. 15–16). Political authority, even when concentrated in a monarch, is not reducible to arbitrary will: it must be exercised according to natural law and ordered toward the perfection and happiness of the community. Wolff's political thought thus places sovereignty within a rational-moral framework rather than treating it as an unlimited personal prerogative (Wolff, 1749/2017, pp. 3–4; Hetteche, 2024, §6). Wolff's admiration for China further reinforced this connection. In the *Oratio de Sinarum philosophia practica*, he presents China as evidence that, even without Christian revelation, natural reason can cultivate virtue, sustain moral education, and support good political order (Larrimore, 2000, pp. 189–190, 199–200; Lach, 1953, pp. 563–564). This made his natural law more adaptable than Pufendorf's to discussions of enlightened rulership and moral cultivation. Yet Wolff's framework also had limits. Although it allowed for a rationally constrained conception of sovereignty, the sovereign still appears primarily as the bearer of



reason, law, and representative will, rather than as a ruler whose personal moral perfection is itself the indispensable foundation of political order (Wolff, 1749/2017, pp. 3–4; Hettche, 2024, §§3, 6).

Thus, Pufendorf and Wolff jointly furnished Fonvizin with a legal-institutional grammar for thinking about state order, encompassing concepts such as state, sovereignty, obligation, civil society, and fundamental law (Gleason, 1985; Gleason, 1975, pp. 563–566). Pufendorf enabled him to understand how a state could function as a unified moral person (Pufendorf, 1672/1991, p. 137, §§10–11), while Wolff allowed him to reflect on why monarchical power must be constrained and why individuals are morally obliged to pursue self-perfection through reason (Wolff, 1720/2024, §§42–45, pp. 31–32; Wolff, 1749/2017, pp. 3–4). Yet neither framework fully addressed the issue that later preoccupied Fonvizin: if the state is to become a fatherland, the relationship between ruler and ruled cannot be accounted for solely through obedience, contract, or law; it must also encompass the moral responsibilities binding the entire political community. Moreover, because the monarch is automatically constituted as the representative of sovereignty, these theories leave unexplored the questions of what kinds of persons are qualified to occupy the throne or under what conditions a monarch might be unfit to represent the sovereign. It is in precisely this sense that the *Ta-Gio* could later enter Fonvizin’s intellectual structure. The text does not replace German natural law; rather, it completes and triangulates with Pufendorf and Wolff, supplementing their conceptual apparatus while simultaneously linking the two frameworks through a shared concern with the ethical foundations of political authority (Fonvizin, 1959, pp. 231–253; Burson, 2005, pp. 233–238).

4.3 From state to fatherland: Fonvizin’s search for a moral community

The central political problem that Fonvizin later confronted was how to distinguish the state from the fatherland. Gleason locates the first clear formulation of this distinction in Fonvizin’s 1771 address on the recovery of Grand Duke Paul (Gleason, 1985, sec. C). Catherine II’s son Paul, as the male heir, possessed a claim that stood in obvious tension with Catherine’s own accession to the throne. Disappointed by Catherine’s policies, the Panin party increasingly looked to the Grand Duke as a source of hope (Ransel, 1975, pp. 3–4). Paul had fallen seriously ill in the summer of 1771, and his recovery by the autumn gave Fonvizin the occasion to present him as the hope of the fatherland (Ransel, 1975, pp. 218–219). Gleason notes that this work first articulated the contrast between Catherine as the agent of the state and Paul as the representative of the fatherland. Catherine stood for the imperial state in its actual operation: autocratic power, court politics, and the machinery of government. Paul, by contrast, was not portrayed as another absolutist ruler, but was assigned a symbolic position: he bore the future happiness of the fatherland and was bound to the fate of millions through “sacred bonds” (Gleason, 1985, sec. C).

The fatherland, in Fonvizin’s usage, was not yet a modern nation-state, nor a fully institutionalized doctrine of national sovereignty. It was rather a still undefined but emotionally and morally charged ideal. It pointed to an imagined community higher than court interest and the personal will of the ruler, one in which ruler and ruled were joined not only by legal relations but also by shared destiny, emotional attachment, and a mutuality of interests. In other words, what Fonvizin sought in the fatherland was not merely an institutional principle for limiting the monarch, but a moral bond capable of linking sovereign, subjects, and common happiness. Gleason is careful on this point. Fonvizin’s fatherland was not, at least initially, an openly anti-state, anti-monarchical, or revolutionary concept.



He did not explicitly deny the legitimacy of Catherine's regime, nor did he directly reject the authority of the imperial state. More precisely, he gradually transferred his enthusiasm and loyalty away from Catherine's actual government and toward the fatherland as a still non-institutionalized moral-national community. This is why Gleason could describe Fonvizin's patriotism as "parallel, not in opposition, to statism" (Gleason, 1985, sec. C).

Fonvizin's problem, therefore, was not whether the monarchy should be overthrown. It was how, without openly rejecting either monarchy or the imperial state, one might separate the destiny and the future welfare of the community from the particular monarch who happened to represent the state. (Gleason 1985; Ransel 1975) The language of German natural law—fundamental laws, sovereignty, and obligation—remained primarily legal and institutional. What Fonvizin increasingly required was a language capable of explaining why the ruler must become the moral bearer of the fatherland, and how a moral bond between ruler and ruled could be formed. It was precisely here that the *Ta-Hio* became attractive to him.

The *Ta-Hio* supplied the conceptual bridge between what Pufendorf and Wolff could each offer Fonvizin. Pufendorf's conception of the state as a moral person explained how ruler and ruled could act as a single political whole; Wolff's perfectionism made it possible to understand the political community as an order directed toward the rational and moral improvement of human beings. Cibot's transformed *Ta-Hio* brought these two languages into contact. On the one hand, Cibot had already recast Confucian moral cultivation as a process of rational perfection. On the other hand, his version still preserved one of the central premises of *The Great Learning*: political order rests on a moral foundation shared by ruler and ruled alike. *Ta-Hio* grounds political order in the ruler's moral perfection, while the Confucian homology between family and state explains why his self-perfection cannot remain a private matter, but will extend outward from the ruler's person to the household, the state, and ultimately the entire political community.

4.4 Conditional sovereignty and the monarch as moral custodian

This section offers a close reading of Fonvizin's *Ta-Gio* and his *Discourse on the Permanent Laws of State* in order to show how Fonvizin incorporated the language of *Ta-Gio* into his own problem of the fatherland. Since Fonvizin's Russian translation follows Cibot's French version in many respects, I do not offer here a separate comparison between Cibot's French and Fonvizin's Russian. Instead, I begin from the Russian text itself and situate it within Fonvizin's own political thought, asking how *Ta-Gio* becomes embedded in the conceptual world of the *Discourse*.

The first point to note is the concept of the ideal ruler in *Ta-Gio*. This monarch is not, in the first instance, an abstract sovereign, but a moral exemplar capable of transforming his own moral capacity into public order. This is precisely the image of the enlightened monarch that Cibot had already fashioned: the ruler must first govern his own heart, passions, and household before he can govern the state. Fonvizin inherits this structure when he describes the monarch as one who first seeks to "subdue his state to innocence and truth" ("государство свое покорить невинности и истине") and therefore begins by establishing order in his own house ("Начинал он постановлением порядка в доме своем") (Fonvizin, 1959, p. 232). The same sequence is then restated in reverse: once order reigns in the monarch's house, it assists him in governing his domains, until he finally "becomes an example to the entire state and expands virtue within it" ("становился он примером всего государства и в нем



расширял добродетель”) (Fonvizin, 1959, p. 232). The clearest instance is his Russian rendering of the passage corresponding to “When a single family practices *ren*, *ren* arises throughout the state.” (— 家仁，一国兴仁). In the Chinese text, the sentence expresses the general principle of family–state homology: the order of the family and the order of the state are structurally continuous, so that *ren* within the family may be extended into *ren* within the state. Relying on Cibot, however, Fonvizin interprets the family in terms of the royal house. He first states that “A great monarch becomes an example to his entire state from within his palace” (“Великий монарх становится примером всему государству своему изнутри своих чертогов”) (Fonvizin, 1959, p. 237). Fonvizin further writes that “the example of the royal family” (“Пример царской семьи”) most effectively reveals the love of virtue and the inclination toward the good with which all human beings are born (“любовь к добродетели и ту склонность ко благу, с которою все люди на свет рождаются”) (Fonvizin, 1959, p. 237). The monarch’s house is thus presented as the source of the moral order of the political community.

The same logic is sharpened through the contrast between Yao and Shun on the one hand and Jie and Zhou on the other. In *Ta-Gio*, the ruler’s virtue and vice move from the ruler’s inner life into the moral disposition of the subjects. Fonvizin writes that the beneficence of Yao and Shun “passed from their hearts into the hearts of all their subjects” (“Благотворение Ново и Куново прешло из сердец их в сердца всех подданных”), whereas Jie and Zhou “instilled their cruelty into them and defiled them with their own vices” (“вселили в них свою лютость и осквернили их пороками своими”) (Fonvizin, 1959, p. 237). What resides in the monarch’s heart is reproduced in the hearts of the people. Fonvizin then adds a striking political judgment: “The sovereign vainly forbids what he allows himself; no one obeys him” (“Государь тщетно то запрещает, что сам себе позволяет; никто ему не повинуется”) (Fonvizin, 1959, p. 237). This sentence pushes the politics of moral example toward a theory of conditional obedience. The subject’s obedience is produced by the moral consistency of the ruler’s own conduct. If the ruler’s commands contradict his way of life, obedience loses its moral ground. In this sense, *Ta-Gio* makes the ruler’s authority dependent upon the visible congruence between what he commands and what he himself embodies.

The *Discourse* brings this logic into the political language of the fatherland. Fonvizin’s definition of the sovereign in the *Discourse* is crucial:

Государь, душа политического тела, , равной судьбине подвергается... но если он сам и не признает верховной ее власти над собою, тогда все отношения его к государству в источниках своих развращаются: пойдут различия между его благом и государственным... словом, вся власть его становится беззаконная; ибо не может быть законна власть, которая ставит себя выше всех законов естественного правосудия. (Fonvizin, 1959, p. 260).

The sovereign, the soul of the political body, is subject to the same fate... But if he himself does not acknowledge its supreme authority over him, then all his relations to the state are corrupted at their very source: distinctions will arise between his own good and the good of the state... in a word, all his power becomes unlawful; for no power can be lawful that places itself above all the laws of natural justice.

The sovereign is the soul of the society he governs. The metaphor of the soul may still vaguely recall the Pufendorfian idea that the monarch embodies sovereignty, but the second half of Fonvizin’s

sentence places a condition on this embodiment, a Russian version of the Mandate of Heaven. If the monarch were merely an office-holder of the state, his personal virtue would be irrelevant to the fundamental structure of political order. But if he is the soul of the political body, then his moral qualities directly determine the health of the entire political body. Therefore, Fonvizin insists that the sovereign must understand that he is established for the state and that his own good must be inseparable from the happiness of his subjects (“он установлен для государства и что собственное его благо от счастья его подданных долженствует быть неразлучно”) (Fonvizin, 1959, p. 259). The ruler’s personal perfection is not a private moral achievement, but the condition under which the state can serve the perfection of human beings and thus possess the moral foundation of a fatherland.

In another passage, Fonvizin draws an even clearer distinction between the state and the fatherland:

Где же произвол одного есть закон верховный, тамо прочная общая связь и существовать не может; тамо есть государство, но нет отечества, есть подданные, но нет граждан, нет того политического тела, которого члены соединялись бы узлом взаимных прав и должностей. (Fonvizin, 1959, p. 255)

Where the arbitrariness of one man is the supreme law, then there is a state, but no fatherland; there are subjects, but no citizens; there is no political body whose members are united by the bond of mutual rights and duties.

This passage develops the conditional obedience already implied in *Ta-Gio*. A state may continue to exist under arbitrariness and coercion; the fatherland, by contrast, exists only when ruler and ruled are united by mutual rights and duties. By arguing that no genuine political body can exist where arbitrary will replaces law, Fonvizin implies that the fatherland has a stronger claim to the people’s obedience than the state alone.

The task of the ideal ruler, therefore, is not merely to occupy the office of sovereignty and perform the ordinary functions of sovereign representation, but to actively preserve the moral bond between himself and his subjects. This requirement finds its clearest expression in the passage of the *Discourse* concerning the sovereign’s debt:

Нет, невинность его есть платеж долгу, коим он сам себе должен: но государству все еще должником остается. Он повинен отвечать ему не только за дурно, которое сделал, но и за добро, которого не сделал. (Fonvizin, 1959, p. 261)

No, his innocence is the payment of a debt that he owes to himself; but to the state he still remains a debtor. He is obliged to answer to it not only for the evil that he has done, but also for the good that he has not done.

Here Fonvizin makes clear that the sovereign’s task is not merely to refrain from evil, but actively to do good. His legitimacy therefore depends on whether he fulfills his positive moral obligation to the fatherland. A monarch who fails to protect the happiness of his subjects, restrain favorites and private passions, and bind his own welfare to the common good may still stand as the representative of the state, but he cannot sustain the fatherland.

In sum, Fonvizin’s conception of the ideal ruler takes shape precisely at the intersection between *Ta-Gio* and the *Discourse*. *Ta-Gio* provides him with the image of the morally perfected monarch: a ruler who offers a shared moral foundation for monarch and subjects through his own virtue, household

order, and moral exemplarity. The *Discourse* then places this image within the Russian language of the fatherland. The ruler is not only the soul of the political body, but also a debtor who must answer to the fatherland for the good he has failed to do. In this way, the enlightened monarch already present in Cibot's translation is further transformed, in Fonvizin's hands, into the moral custodian of the fatherland. As Fonvizin states in the *Discourse*, the sovereign must be a "good man, good father, good master" ("Государь, добрый муж, добрый отец, добрый хозяин") (Fonvizin, 1959, p. 267).

4.5 From the Confucian sage king to the Russian fatherland

Ta-Gio did not provide a fully developed alternative political theory, nor did it transform Fonvizin's emerging national consciousness into something more Confucian than constitutionalist. Its intervention was limited in scope but consequential in effect: it helped reorient the center of gravity of existing political discourse from institutional restraints to moral restraints, from the formal structure of state power to the ethical qualifications of the ruler, and from the legal foundations of obedience to the moral foundations of voluntary allegiance. *Ta-Gio* helped Fonvizin articulate his idea of the fatherland: the ethical qualities that should define its ideal ruler, and the moral bond that could inspire subjects to identify with, remain loyal to, and ultimately defend the political community he embodied.

To sum up, this analysis invites us to reconsider the reception of Chinese classics in eighteenth-century Russia. Fonvizin's *Ta-Gio* cannot be reduced either to an instance of *le rêve chinois* or to an allegorical disguise of purely domestic political criticism. Its significance lies not in the extent to which Fonvizin faithfully preserved the original meaning of *The Great Learning*, nor in providing sufficient evidence for any direct or substantial influence of Confucianism upon the Russian Enlightenment. Rather, *Ta-Gio* allows us to see a conceptual relay: an ethical and political structure originally rooted in the Confucian tradition was reformulated through Jesuit translation and Enlightenment vocabulary before acquiring a new meaning in the Russian context. In this successive process of translation, concepts rooted in different intellectual traditions were brought into dialogue and became integrated in surprisingly intricate ways.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined Fonvizin's translation of *The Great Learning* not simply as an episode in Russian Sinophilia, but as a case of conceptual mediation. Beginning with the Confucian structure of *The Great Learning*, moving through Cibot's Jesuit and Enlightenment rewriting, and ending with Fonvizin's Russian interpretation, the article has shown how a Chinese ethical-political text could be transformed into a language for thinking about enlightened monarchy, moral obligation, and the Russian fatherland.

The argument has proceeded in three steps. First, *The Great Learning* itself offers a compact but powerful account of political order as grounded in moral cultivation. Its sequence of self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and peace under heaven constitutes a theory of universal moral order that penetrates every aspect of personal, social and political life. Second, Cibot's French translation altered this structure by Christianizing and Enlightenmentizing its key terms. The Confucian language of virtue, Heaven, mandate, and sage rulership was rendered into a vocabulary of sovereign good, natural law, reason, obligation, and the enlightened monarchy. Third, Fonvizin's Russian *Ta-Gio* inserted this already mediated text into the specific political problem of Catherinian Russia: the



emerging distinction between the imperial state and the fatherland. In this context, the Confucian family–state homology was transformed into a ruler–fatherland bond, and the doctrine of conditional mandate became a way to intensify the moral conditions of monarchy.

Zhu Xi’s Chinese sage king, Abbé Cibat’s enlightened monarch, and Fonvizin’s moral custodian of the fatherland are not identical figures. They belong to different textual, religious, and political worlds. Yet the movement from one to the other shows how translation can produce new political meanings. This does not mean that Fonvizin became a Confucian thinker, nor that *The Great Learning* directly produced a Russian theory of popular sovereignty. The point is more limited, but also more revealing. *Ta-Gio* provided Fonvizin with a language that contemporary European thinkers could not fully supply. Through the mediated Confucian text, Fonvizin could imagine a monarch who remained necessary to political order, but whose legitimacy depended upon virtue, reason and the common good of the fatherland.

This case suggests a broader way of reconsidering eighteenth-century Russian *le rêve chinois*. It is often noted that eighteenth-century European admiration for China rested as much on selective knowledge and appropriation as on accurate understanding. Such idealization would later give way, in the nineteenth-century, to more openly negative European and Russian views of China, shaped by nationalism, imperialism, and new theories of hierarchies of civilization. Yet the history of Fonvizin’s *Ta-Gio* shows that even mistranslated knowledge could have real conceptual force. In this case, China was not merely an exotic mirror in which Europeans contemplated themselves. Through translations and mistranslations, it became part of the intellectual materials through which European political concepts were reorganized and new forms of political imagination became possible. In this sense, Fonvizin’s *Ta-Gio* marks a small but significant moment in which Chinese classical ethics entered the formation of Russian political thought.

Declarations and Acknowledgment:

The author declares no conflicts of interest. This paper was first presented at the *International Conference on Globalisation/Deglobalisation in Languages, Education, Culture and Communication (GLECC2025)*.

References

- Angle, S. C. (2022). Social and political thought in Chinese philosophy. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022 ed.). Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/chinese-social-political/>
- Behme, T. (2009). Introduction. In S. Pufendorf, *Two Books of the Elements of Universal Jurisprudence* (T. Behme, Ed.; W. A. Oldfather, Trans.). Liberty Fund.
- Brown, S. J. (2020). China, social ethics and the European Enlightenment. In A. Chow & E. Wild-Wood (Eds.), *Ecumenism and Independency in World Christianity: Historical Studies in Honour of Brian Stanley* (pp. 243–261). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004437548_015



- Burson, J. D. (2005). Mandate of the fatherland: Denis Fonvizin's translation of Neo-Confucianism into the politics of enlightened absolutism under Catherine the Great. *Vestnik: The Journal of Russian and Asian Studies*, 3(1), 77–102.
- Chan, W.-T. (1963). *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton University Press.
- Ching, J., & Oxtoby, W. G. (Eds. & Trans.). (1992). *Moral Enlightenment: Leibniz and Wolff on China*. Steyler Verlag.
- Cibot, P.-M. (1776). Ta-Hio, ou la Grande Science. In *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les mœurs, les usages, &c. des Chinois: Par les missionnaires de Pékin* (Vol. 1, pp. 438–458). Nyon.
- Csikszentmihályi, M. (2024). Confucius. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024 ed.). Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/confucius/>
- Dehergne, J. (1983). Une grande collection: Mémoires concernant les Chinois (1776–1814). *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, 72, 267–298. <https://doi.org/10.3406/befeo.1983.1461>
- El Amine, L. (2015). *Classical Confucian Political Thought: A New Interpretation*. Princeton University Press.
- Eno, R. (2016). *The Great Learning and The Doctrine of the Mean: Translation, Commentary, and Notes*. Indiana University ScholarWorks. <https://hdl.handle.net/2022/23424>
- Fonvizin, D. I. (1959). *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh* [Collected works in two volumes] (G. P. Makogonenko, Ed., Vol. 2). Goslitizdat.
- Gleason, W. (1975). Political ideals and loyalties of some Russian writers of the early 1760s. *Slavic Review*, 34(3), 560–575. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2495565>
- Gleason, W. (1985). Introduction: State and nationality in Fonvizin's writings. In D. I. Fonvizin, *The Political and Legal Writings of Denis Fonvizin* (W. Gleason, Trans., pp. 1–21). Ardis Publishers.
- Hettche, M., & Dyck, C. W. (2024). Christian Wolff. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024 ed.). Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/wolff-christian/>
- Hobbes, T. (1996). *Leviathan* (R. Tuck, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1651)
- Israel, J. I. (2006). *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752*. Oxford University Press.
- Lach, D. F. (1945). Leibniz and China. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 6(4), 436–455.
- Lach, D. F. (1953). The Sinophilism of Christian Wolff (1679–1754). *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 14(4), 561–574.
- Lach, D. F. (1957). *The Preface to Leibniz' Novissima Sinica: Commentary, Translation, Text*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Larrimore, M. (2000). Orientalism and antivoluntarism in the history of ethics: On Christian Wolff's *Oratio de Sinarum philosophia practica*. *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 28(2), 189–219. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0384-9694.00044>
- Leibniz, G. W. (1994). Preface to the *Novissima Sinica*. In D. J. Cook & H. Rosemont Jr. (Eds. & Trans.), *Writings on China* (pp. 45–60). Open Court. (Original work published 1697)
- Lim, S. S. (2013). *China and Japan in the Russian Imagination, 1685–1922*. Routledge.
- Maggs, B. W. (1984). *Russia and "le rêve chinois": China in Eighteenth-Century Russian Literature*. Voltaire Foundation.
- Meynard, T. (2015). *The Jesuit Reading of Confucius*. Brill.
- Perkins, F. (2023). Metaphysics in Chinese philosophy. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023 ed.). Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/chinese-metaphysics/>



- Pufendorf, S. (1991). *On the Duty of Man and Citizen According to Natural Law* (J. Tully, Ed.; M. Silverthorne, Trans.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1673)
- Raeff, M. (Ed.). (1966). *Russian Intellectual History: An Anthology*. Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Ransel, D. L. (1975). *The Politics of Catherinian Russia: The Panin Party*. Yale University Press.
- Rogger, H. (1960). *National Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century Russia*. Harvard University Press.
- Rowbotham, A. H. (1932). Voltaire, Sinophile. *PMLA*, 47(4), 1050–1065. <https://doi.org/10.2307/457929>
- Rowbotham, A. H. (1945). The impact of Confucianism on seventeenth-century Europe. *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 4(3), 224–237.
- Seidler, M. (2021). Pufendorf's moral and political philosophy. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 ed.). Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/pufendorf-moral/>
- Statman, A. (2023). *A Global Enlightenment: Western Progress and Chinese Science*. University of Chicago Press.
- Wolff, C. (1726). *Oratio de Sinarum philosophia practica, in solemnibus panegyri recitata, cum in ipso Academiae Halensis natali 28. d. 12. Julij A.O.R. 1721 fasces prorectorales successoribus traderet, notis uberius illustrata*. Apud Joh. B. Andreae & Henr. Hort.
- Wolff, C. (2017). *The Law of Nations Treated According to the Scientific Method* (J. H. Drake, Trans.; T. Ahnert, Rev. Trans. & Ed.). Liberty Fund. (Original work published 1749)
- Wolff, C. (1992). On the philosopher king and the ruling philosopher. In J. Ching & W. G. Oxtoby (Eds. & Trans.), *Moral Enlightenment: Leibniz and Wolff on China*. Steyler Verlag. (Original work published 1730)
- Wong, D. (2024). Chinese ethics. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024 ed.). Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/ethics-chinese/>
- Yang, B. 杨伯峻. (2006). *Lunyu yizhu 论语译注* [Translation and annotation of the Analects]. Zhonghua Shuju.
- Yang, D. (2024). Exploring the translation patterns of “Ren”: Insights into translation practice from a cross-cultural perspective. *International Research in Education*, 12(1), 68–85.
- Zhu, X. 朱熹. (2011). *Si shu zhangju jizhu 四书章句集注* [Collected commentaries on the Four Books]. Zhonghua Shuju.

About the Author:

Bingrui Cao received her BA and MA degrees from Shanghai International Studies University. Her research focuses on Russian literature and intellectual history across the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, and the history of Sino-Russian cultural and literary exchange.

