

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

It is not really a book to linger over: it is **rather** scruffy, part of the cover is missing, ae3w0.50snJETQq26000886

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

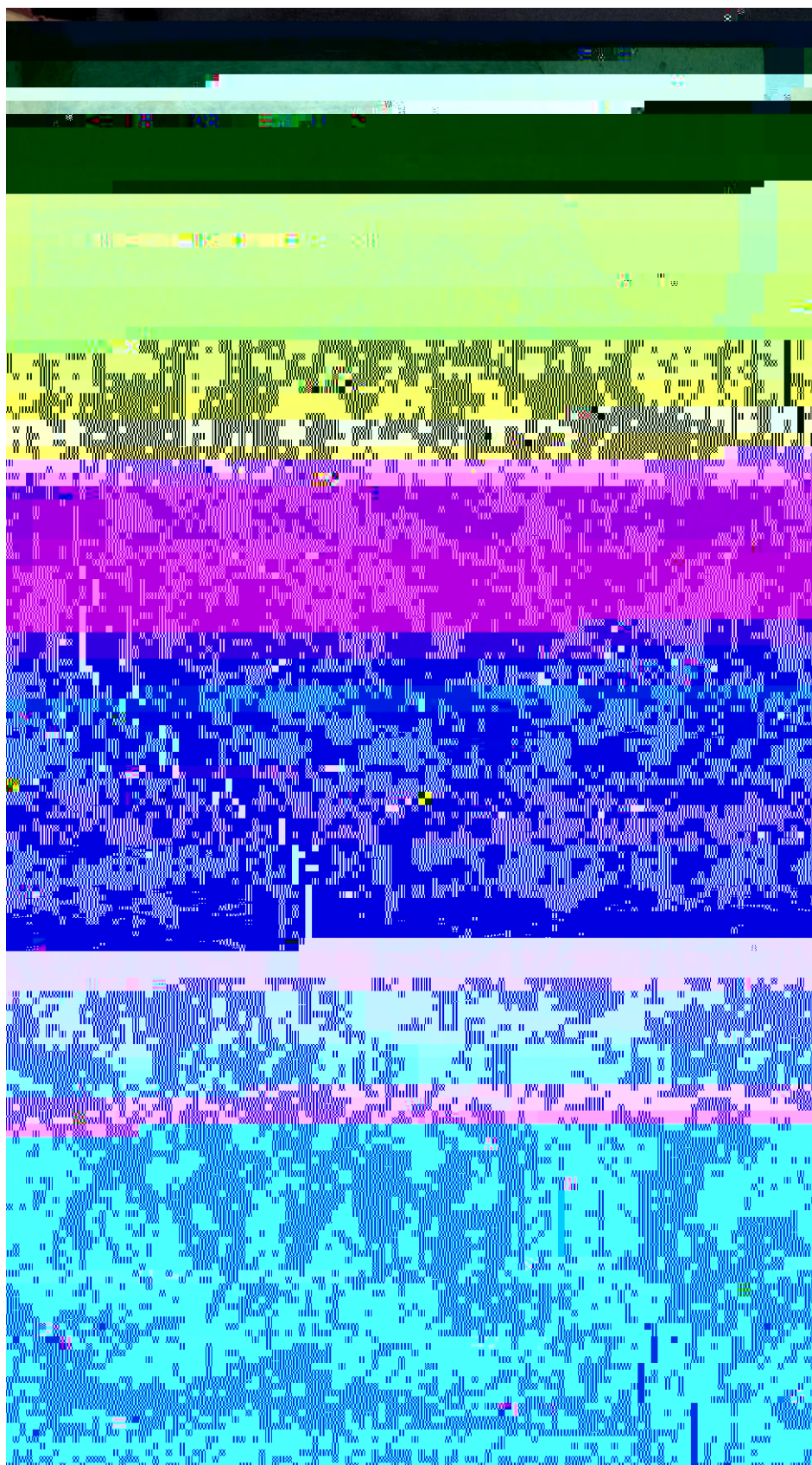
When did it reach New College Library? In 1697, Edward Bernard (1638-1697), who was Savilian Professor of Astronomy, published a vast catalogue of books and manuscripts in the British Isles. The section on the holdings of New College ends with MS 323, so the book of Mencius, registered as MS 324, must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

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

³ James Willoughby, draft catalogue of the manuscripts of New College, 1677, ff. 14v-15r, 16r, 17r, 18r, 19r, 20r, 21r, 22r, 23r, 24r, 25r, 26r, 27r, 28r, 29r, 30r, 31r, 32r, 33r, 34r, 35r, 36r, 37r, 38r, 39r, 40r, 41r, 42r, 43r, 44r, 45r, 46r, 47r, 48r, 49r, 50r, 51r, 52r, 53r, 54r, 55r, 56r, 57r, 58r, 59r, 60r, 61r, 62r, 63r, 64r, 65r, 66r, 67r, 68r, 69r, 70r, 71r, 72r, 73r, 74r, 75r, 76r, 77r, 78r, 79r, 80r, 81r, 82r, 83r, 84r, 85r, 86r, 87r, 88r, 89r, 90r, 91r, 92r, 93r, 94r, 95r, 96r, 97r, 98r, 99r, 100r.

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

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



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