

December 2008

Historical Legacy of Jesuits in China

Lawrence Fouraker
St. John Fisher University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/verbum>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fouraker, Lawrence (2008) "Historical Legacy of Jesuits in China," *Verbum*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 18.
Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/verbum/vol6/iss1/18>

This document is posted at <https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/verbum/vol6/iss1/18> and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at . For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjf.edu.

Historical Legacy of Jesuits in China

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"What is the meaning today of the missionary activities of the Society of Jesus in China? The attempt by members of the Society of Jesus to convert Chinese to Christianity from the late-16th to early-18th centuries was part of the Catholic Reformation's missionary expansion around the world. Was the Jesuit mission also part and parcel of an expansionist Western imperialism, or did it rather reflect a humanistic universalism?² Obviously, there are some aspects of both, but on balance, the conversion of Chinese in this era is stronger evidence of the universal appeal of the Christian message.

Historical Legacy of the Jesuits in China

Lawrence Fouraker, PhD

History Dept.

What is the meaning today of the missionary activities of the Society of Jesus in China? The attempt by members of the Society of Jesus to convert Chinese to Christianity from the late-16th to early-18th centuries was part of the Catholic Reformation's missionary expansion around the world. Was the Jesuit mission also part and parcel of an expansionist Western imperialism, or did it rather reflect a humanistic universalism?² Obviously, there are some aspects of both, but on balance, the conversion of Chinese in this era is stronger evidence of the universal appeal of the Christian message.

Early Christians in China

The Jesuits were not the first Christians in China; foreign traders making their way into China along the Silk Roads included some Christians perhaps as early as the 4th century AD. Then, in 635 Alopen, leader of the Church of the East (the Syro-Oriental Church, also known incorrectly as Nestorianism), arrived in China from the West. Within a few years Alopen had written the first Christian book in Chinese, *Xuting mishi suojing*

² For a searing portrayal of how the brutality of Western racism and imperialism could be combined with Christian humanism (albeit in a very different cultural and historical context in Latin America), see the 1986 Oscar-winning (albeit confusing) film *The Mission*.

(Jesus Messiah Sutra), which stressed the universality of Christianity.³ Alopen's work also emphasized the idea that Christianity did not go against loyalty to the emperor and filial piety, but rather reinforced them. After the reigning emperor, Tai zong, read Alopen's work, he came to tolerate if not endorse Christianity in China. The end of this initial phase of Christian influence came during a general persecution of religion in the late Tang (ca. 845). Christianity briefly re-entered China during the Yüan (Mongol) Dynasty (1271-1368), in a Franciscan mission authorized by the Pope, the time of the first Archbishop of Peking, John of Monte Corvino.

Enter the Jesuits

Surpassing all other early Christian influences in premodern China were the Jesuits, members of the newly-organized Society of Jesus (begun by St. Ignatius of Loyola under Pope Paul III in 1540). The initial Jesuit mission to China was St. Francis Xavier's ill-fated attempt to reach China in 1552, but the real formative period of the Jesuit mission in China was in the last seventy-five years of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The main Jesuit presence began with the Portuguese settlement of Macao in 1579 and ended with the faltering of the mission in the 1720s due to a combination of pressures from Rome and Peking.

The history of the Jesuits' mission in China is a dramatic story of a handful of men—rarely more than twenty European priests and brothers in China at any one time. Overcoming enormous cultural, linguistic, and physical challenges (half of the would-be

³ John W. Witek, SJ, "Christianity and China: Universal Teaching from the West," in Stephen Uhalley and Xiaoxin Wu, *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 13.

missionaries died on the trip to Asia), these dedicated members of the pan-European Society of Jesus succeeded in converting more than 200,000 Chinese by 1700.

At the core of the Jesuits' success was that they were learned men in the Christian humanism tradition, which ultimately helped convince the Chinese of the worthiness of their cause. The Jesuits were proselytizing in a proud and civilization, and their renaissance humanism was an essential asset in winning over not only the educated elite but ordinary Chinese as well.

Matteo Ricci and Accomodation

The most famous Jesuit in China was the Italian Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), who arrived in 1588. After Ricci (known to most Chinese as Li Madou) finally made his way to the capital, he concentrated on the establishment of good relations with the emperor and his court. In 1598 he presented the emperor with Western gifts such as clocks and maps, and offered his skills in astronomy, geography, calculus and mathematics.⁴ The court's response was to have Ricci arrested for not having gone through proper channels. But Ricci's erudition and genuine interest in Chinese culture, combined with the Jesuits' superior methods of predicting eclipses, techniques of making a telescope, and so on, before long brought them favor in the courts of Ming emperors.

The Jesuit mission was from the outset a two-way street. European Jesuits provided the first accurate information about China to the outside world. One scholar considers the Jesuits to have been engaged in "proto-Sinology," the ancestor of modern

⁴ George H. Dunne, *Generation of Giants: The Story of the Jesuits in China in the Last Decades of the Ming Dynasty* (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2006), 79.

Western scholarship about things Chinese.⁵ For example, early Jesuits translated the writings of Confucius into European languages for the first time. On the other side, Jesuits provided curious Chinese with translations of Western scientific treatises, and star charts and other astronomical knowledge.

Ricci and his followers did not neglect Christian teachings, but they were not at first the central focus of their activities. Ricci himself wrote the catechism *Tianzhu shiyi* (True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven) in 1603, a document that stuck to Catholic theology but also accepted Chinese customs such as filial piety and respect for one's ancestors.

Winning Hearts and Minds

Less recognized than Mateo Ricci, but arguably more important in terms of the overall mission were other Jesuits, such as two more Italians, Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607), who pioneered Chinese language study and Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606), who devoted three decades in spreading the word outside the capital, converting many more Chinese than Ricci.

The Jesuits who arrived in China did not have a special preparation tailored for China, although they shared a common training as men of learning. Their nine-year course of study imparted mastery of the natural sciences, skills of analysis, argumentation, and teaching, and, of undeniable relevance for the Chinese mission, language. In addition to fluency in Latin, all were skilled at some other foreign language, such as Greek or Hebrew.

⁵ David E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989).

Yet these Jesuits arrived in China with no real preparation for the challenge of learning the fiendishly difficult Chinese language. From 1582 when Michele Ruggieri began his attempt to learn Chinese it took six years to compile the first Portuguese-Chinese dictionary, and it was many more years before the Europeans began to master the tone system and mutually incomprehensible regional dialects.

When it came to religious teaching, Ricci initially used a “passive” method, in which elite Chinese interested in Western things visited Ricci’s residence to observe Western curiosities and to learn indirectly about the faith. But by 1600 other Jesuits had begun more active measures, in a dozen or more locations around the country. Niccolò Longobardo, for instance, would arrive at a town, having given word in advance that “a preacher from the distant West... would speak to them about religious matters.”⁶ After explaining the basic features of the religion, he introduced each of the Ten Commandments, and unveiled a portrait of Jesus surrounded by candles and incense. For those who were literate, Longobardo distributed simple pamphlets and taught them lessons to impart to others. After confirming their adherence to these teachings, he baptized the new faithful, left behind rosaries and medallions, and moved on to the next village or town.

The indirect conversion of women and children (who did not attend the meetings) sometimes played a key role in converting others. For example, in one village, Rodrigo de Figueirido reported that children learned the sign of the cross more readily than their parents, and laughed at their parents while teaching them the proper movements. He was

⁶ Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579-1724* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 293.

also delighted to report in one such rural setting that the parents then corrected children who used a common Buddhist prayer, teaching them to say instead “Lord of Heaven help me” (*Tianzhu jiu wo*). The children immediately began to repeat that preferred Jesuit phrase.⁷

Chinese Confraternities

One important factor in the spread of Christianity was the Jesuits’ role in the formation and operation of Catholic associations (*hui*) or confraternities. The confraternities became a hybrid mixture of indigenous institutions and foreign ideology, a clear example of the Jesuits’ cultural accommodation. Matteo Ricci helped set up the earliest associations in the early 17th century, such as a Marian society established in 1609 (*Shengmu hui*, associations dedicated to Mary were the most common confraternities). Although at first, these associations tended to include traditional Chinese practices, such as banquets and collecting dues, both activities were curtailed under Jesuit pressure to reform. These early groups would typically meet to kneel, make the sign of the cross, and say an introductory prayer. Then, members recited nine sets of nine Ave Marias and nine Paternosters. After another sign of the cross and reading of passages from a holy book, the meeting was over.⁸

Many confraternities were more Chinese in organization and style, even if their members were Christian, such as those dedicated chiefly to charity. In addition to providing food for the hungry, these charitable groups also helped the dead and dying.

⁷ Brockey, 309.

⁸ Brockey, 341.

One such group, the Confraternity of Piety, made a point of attending burials, singing the litanies and wearing mourning clothes. “In this way,” its founder noted in 1643, “the relatives of the deceased, even if they are heathens, remain quiet, seeing how we commemorate the dead, because until now they thought that we kicked them into the grave without any ceremony, like dogs.”⁹

In addition to the role of confraternities, Church teachings were also transmitted by a network of lay catechists who taught doctrine, provided oversight, maintained sanctuaries, and at times preached. This organizational structure of the Jesuit mission made it largely self-sustaining. Priests were essential (to offer Mass or hear confessions), but not many of them. When the overworked Jesuits requested more priests in 1703, their call was only for twenty-four more.¹⁰

The Rites Controversy and the End of the Mission

The transition to the Qing (Manchu) Dynasty (1644-1911) did not initially impinge upon the missionary activities of the Jesuits. Indeed, some Jesuits rose to new influence in the Qing, such as the German Johann Adam Schall (1591-1666) who served the first Qing emperor as Director of the Board of Astronomy. But Schall’s status clearly depended upon the patronage of individual emperors, and following the death of the Shunzhi emperor, he was arrested. Other Qing emperors were more favorable to Christianity, especially Kangxi (r. 1661-1722). Flemish mathematician and astronomer Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688) not only served Kangxi at court, but also became close

⁹ Brockey, 379.

¹⁰ Brockey, 364.

friends with the powerful ruler. In addition to adjusting the Chinese calendar and advising the emperor about astronomy, Verbiest involved himself in making aqueducts, steam engines, and cannon.

As the 18th century began, though, the so-called Rites Controversy heated up. Although it had its origins in the 1630s, the controversy had had little real impact in China itself, as it was more a focus of discussion and argument in Europe. Indeed, the Rites Controversy was part of a broader international debate over the acceptance of local customs by Catholic missionaries. The controversy started when Mendicant missionaries (Franciscan and Dominican) objected to certain rituals in China, particularly how Jesuit missionaries seemingly participated in Chinese Confucian ceremonies and Chinese converts continued to worship at ancestral altars. What the Jesuits had come to see as political and social customs, the newly-arrived missionaries considered idolatry. Many Jesuits felt the Spanish Mendicants misunderstood the nature of Chinese culture, whereas the Mendicant friars, arriving in China from Mexico, and especially the Philippines, were not inclined to make any concessions to local culture. Disputes between French and Portuguese Jesuits back in Europe was another important part of the Controversy.

Most learned Jesuits chafed at the charge they had accommodated too much, especially since these charges often came from recently-arrived missionaries with little knowledge of or experience in China. Furthermore, Jesuits were far from permitting their converts to practice any local custom. They insisted upon monogamy, which cost them many converts among the well-to-do, and were specific about acceptable language for translating Christian terms. While it is true that they often had acquired a considerable respect for Confucian teachings, their accommodationist approach was primarily

pragmatic, based on their conviction that it was the only possible strategy for widespread conversion in China.

Things came to a head in 1704 when Pope Clement XI sided with the Dominicans in the Rites Controversy, ruling against some key Jesuit policies such as tolerance of Chinese rites and display of *Jing Tian* tablets in their churches. After some misunderstanding (and perhaps delaying tactics), in 1715 the Pope reaffirmed his intentions explicitly in the Papal bull *Ex illa die* that Chinese terms for God should not be employed, and that Confucian rituals or ancestor worship must not be attended by Chinese Christians.

The challenges the Jesuits faced from their own Church in the early 18th century were now joined by domestic crisis, as the new emperor Yongzheng decided in 1724 that the best solution to the squabbles among Christian missionaries was to expel them all, excepting those in service to the court. Chinese Christians were not in general subjected to harsh persecution, and a few individual missionaries continued to operate underground, but the Jesuit mission was essentially drawing to a close, as it could win few new converts.

The methods of the Jesuits remained dubious until Pope Pius XII reversed the Church's stance with a statement in 1939 that Chinese customs were not superstitious but an honorable way to respect one's relatives, and permitted to Chinese Christians.¹¹ Later Popes have continued to soften the official stance on Matteo Ricci and the Jesuits' stance on Chinese rites. In 1959 Pope John XXIII decreed in his encyclical *Princeps Pastorum*

¹¹ Sources for the papal statements include Matthew Bunson and Margaret Bunson, *OSV's Encyclopedia of Catholic History* (Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2004), and J. Brucker, "Matteo Ricci," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company).

that Ricci was a “famous missionary” whose contribution had been conversion of the learned.¹² Pope John Paul II recognized Matteo Ricci’s contributions in a speech in 2001, calling him “a pioneer” and “a precious connecting link between West and East, between European Renaissance culture and Chinese culture, and between the ancient and magnificent Chinese civilization and the world of Europe.” Significantly, the Pope also remarked that “his merit lay above all in the realm of inculturation,” seemingly offering the final word on the Rites Controversy.¹³

Conclusion: The Jesuit Legacy

The history of European Jesuit missionaries in establishing and maintaining a missionary presence halfway around the world for a century-and-a-half has rightly been praised as a cultural, as well as a religious, interaction. Christian missionaries renewed their activities in modern China in the 19th century under the protection of Western imperialism, opening a new phase in the history of Christianity in China. The activities of Protestant missionaries exceeded those of Catholics, and some key leading thinkers and political leaders converted.

After the Communist revolution of 1949, Christianity was very much a minority religion, struggling under direct and indirect persecution until the reforms following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. In today’s China, the popularity of Christianity is growing at a pace almost matching their economic expansion. The communist government

¹²http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_28111959_princeps_en.html

¹³http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2001/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20011024_matteo-ricci_en.html

recognizes four million Catholics and ten million Protestants, but reliable estimates of the total number of Chinese Christians including members of thousands of underground “house churches” are at least four times higher. (For example, estimates of the Catholics directly loyal to Rome exceed twelve million, more than three times the four million adherents of the government-sponsored Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association.) Some observers estimate there are now more Christians in China than the sixty-six million members of the Chinese Communist Party.

The growing popularity of Christianity in today’s China shares one key factor with the mission of the Society of Jesus in the 17th century: it is based less on “hegemony” or external pressure than on the voluntary conversion of Chinese. Both periods thus confirm the extraordinary appeal of the Christian message, and that such a message could (and can) be conveyed to many Chinese in all walks of life (including those with limited literacy and no abilities in foreign languages) confirms the true universality of Christianity.¹⁴ The fate of Christianity in the period of Jesuit missionary activity had many ups and downs. But when Kangxi issued his Edict of Toleration in 1692 it showed that even emperors could be convinced that the foreign faith did not threaten the fabric of Chinese society. Christianity in China was perhaps one of the earliest examples of “viral” phenomena in world history; as one study notes: “The Christian message *is* dynamite material, whether one accepts it with faith or only has an inkling of its enormous evocative power.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Father Witek quotes St. Paul, the founder of the Church: “There does not exist among you, Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus,” 11.

¹⁵ Stephen Uhalley, “Burdened Past, Hopeful Future,” Stephen Uhalley and Xiaoxin Wu, *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 4.