

GIULIO ALENI, conveyor of medieval Western learning

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Giulio Aleni was one of the most distinguished Jesuits in China between the pioneer work of Matteo Ricci and the glorious epoch of Johann Adam Schall and Ferdinand Verbiest, court astronomers and favourites of the Manchu emperors. As vice-provincial from 1641 to 1649, Aleni was the superior of the Society of Jesus in China. Labouring mostly in the south and far from the centre of imperial power in Beijing, he never served any emperor as clock-maker, astronomer, diplomat, confidant, surveyor, or court painter, as did many of the other Jesuits in Peking. He remained in the provinces, made friends among the scholars and officials, and won converts. His life is of interest not only because he wrote the first global geography, the first general summary of medieval Western learning, and the first Aristotelian psychology in Chinese, but also because his career probably resembles, more closely than Schall's or Verbiest's those of most other Jesuits in China. Thus, a study of his life may help put the Beijing Jesuits' efforts in a new perspective.

YOUNG GIULIO

Giulio Aleni was born in Brescia, Italy, in 1582, exactly four centuries ago, and in the year that Ricci entered China.

The Aleni family belonged to the nobili of Brescia. However, the family does not seem to have a particularly distinguished history. The family name suggests that they had moved in from the rural district of Leno, 20 km south of the city. In any case, not much more is known about the Aleni clan, nor about Giulio's immediate family. Nothing is known about Giulio's childhood, but a contemporaneous manuscript had this to say about his youth:

(Giulio was brought up) in the school of the Jesuit fathers of S. Antonio. There he acquired the sciences, devotion, and the holy fear of God in such a way that he was accepted into the devout Congregation of St. Catherine of Siena. Having learnt in (this congregation) the progresses of the spirit and to be an enemy of the world, he turned himself to the total service of God and wanted to enter religion...

When Giulio first attended the Jesuit college is not known, but it was probably no later than 1597. It was in an atmosphere of intense Jesuit spirituality that Giulio passed his formative years. The numerous congregations and sodalities in the College were a kind of breeding ground for the priesthood or the religious life. The school had perhaps 300 pupils at this time. Of these, in 1605 alone, 20 applied to join the Society of Jesus, but only six were accepted. It is no wonder, then, that when Giulio was pursuing his literary studies, his Jesuit vocation ripened. In 1600, he entered the novitiate.

During his two years of novitiate, he attended fervently to his spiritual formation. In 1602, he pronounced his simple vows, and was sent to the Jesuit college at Parma to study philosophy.

The philosophical knowledge and other sciences he acquired at Parma were probably based largely upon the Aristotelian textbooks compiled at the Jesuit university of Coimbra in Portugal. This knowledge was to form the bulk of his Chinese works, A Summary of Western Learning (Xi xue fan) and An Outline of Human Nature (Xing xue cu shu), two of the first comprehensive works on the medieval scholarship of Europe.

It was in the course of his philosophical studies that his missionary vocation matured. In a letter addressed to the General of the society of Jesus in 1603, he confessed that he felt "animated by an ardent desire not only to forsake any and every thing for the love of Christ, but especially to exhaust myself, to use all my strength and my entire life, to help those poor souls redeemed by the Precious Blood of Our Lord", but who are "deprived of all spiritual aid, in so many parts" of this world. He asked to be sent to Peru, but admitted that he was really "indifferent... as to this or that part of the East or the West Indies".

His first application to go abroad was not granted. At the end of his philosophy course, he was assigned to teach at the Collegio dei Nobili at Bologna. After completing his two-year teaching assignment, Giulio became a student of theology at the Roman College. Here he might have met Adam Schall, then 17 years old and a student at the German College, and who was to become one of the most famous of all the Jesuits in China. In 1609, Giulio was finally assigned to the China mission, and left Rome. He had already been ordained, probably the year before.

It was then required by the system of Portuguese patronage that all missionaries to Asia had to sail from Lisbon, from where Aleni travelled with two other young Jesuits bound for China.

As the Jesuits in China were using their calendrical science to gain imperial favour, Ricci had requested that new missionaries should have had mathematical and astronomical training. So it was probably as an exercise in calendrical science that Giulio observed a lunar eclipse during this voyage.

After a voyage of almost two years, with a share of the discomforts and perils common to the voyages of the period, Giulio Aleni and his companions arrived at Macao in late 1610. He was just 29 years old, and his career as a missionary was about to begin.

MISSIONARY CAREER

Arriving at Macao in 1610, Aleni taught mathematics at the Jesuit college while resting from his travels and learning the Chinese language. He entered China in early 1613.

That year, he was recorded as travelling to Shanghai with the famous convert Paul Xu Guangchi. He was then sent to Kaifeng to examine the Hebrew Scriptures possessed by the Jewish families there, but was rebuffed.

In 1616, when the first anti-Christian persecutions broke out following the submission of a memorial to the throne by Shen Jue, vice-minister of rites at Nanjing, Aleni and several other Jesuits sought refuge in the house of Michael Yang Tingyun in Hangzhou. Shen Jue had endeavoured to banish all missionaries from China. Aleni probably spent this period of enforced confinement in studying and polishing his Chinese style which, as evinced in his publications, is impressive indeed.

(At this time, there were 14 Jesuits in China, 8 European priests and 6 coadjutors from Macao. A few years before, in 1608, Ricci had counted a total of 2,000 Christians in China.)

When the persecutions subsided, Aleni became more active in Hangzhou. In 1619, according to a letter he wrote his brother in Brescia, he baptised 265 converts. This letter also contained one of the first reports to Europe about the emergence of the Manchus.

Meanwhile, he remained under the patronage of Yang and Leo Li Zhizao, another prominent Christian official, for whose mother he performed the last rites in 1620.

It was about this time that he was sent by Xu to Yangzhou to tutor an official named Ma in scientific subjects. Aleni converted and baptised him in 1620, and christened him Peter. When Ma was appointed prefect of Yan'an in Shanxi, Aleni went with him. Later, Aleni moved on to Jiangzhou where he founded the Jesuit mission of Shaanxi. Although he did not stay there for long, he was fondly remembered. It was also in Shaanxi that he succeeded in planting grapes, thus solving the problem of the shortage in China of Eucharistic wine.

By the end of 1621, he was back in Hangzhou, where he stayed two years. During this time, he wrote three important books introducing Western knowledge. He also won a number of converts among the scholar-gentry.

In 1623, he was at Changshu in the Yangzi delta, and baptised Qu

Shisi, a nephew of one of Ricci's earliest converts. Qu later was to serve one of the refugee courts resisting the Manchu conquest, and died a martyr for the Ming cause.

The next year, Aleni met Ye Xianggao at Hangzhou. Ye had just been forced out of office as grand secretary by Chief Eunuch Wei Zhongxian, and was on his way back to his native Fujian. He invited Aleni into that province. The Jesuit mission was thus introduced there, and from 1625 on, Fujian became the centre of Aleni's activities.

When Aleni followed Ye into Fujian in 1625, he was not the first Christian missionary in modern times to have operated there. Before and during his tenure in that province, Dominicans and Franciscans from the Philippines had been active, starting with a tentative Dominican venture at Xiamen in 1594. But the mendicants did not go far inland, and the Jesuits under the leadership of Aleni were much more successful in covering the entire province.

It is not possible from available evidence to trace Aleni's footsteps from county to county, or year by year. Aleni and other Jesuits probably travelled a great deal from one town to another, spending a few weeks in each place every year or every few years. It is sufficient to say that for more than a decade, steady progress was made in proselytising in Fujian. By the late 1630's there was at least one church in each of the eight prefectures of the province, and some 15 chapels in various smaller towns. Every year there were several hundred new converts. In 1638, some ancient stone crosses, discovered earlier in the century at Chuanzhou, were recognised by one of Aleni's converts as Christian monuments, and served as a climax to the decade's developments.

In 1638, there was a major set-back, an omen of the Rites Controversy to come in the next century. In that year, some mendicant missionaries on Taiwan, with their intolerant and uncompromising policy on native rites, gave rise to some unrest which soon spread to Fujian and provoked a general persecution of all Christians in the province. Most of the churches and chapels were confiscated; Christians were fined, some imprisoned. The missionaries, including Aleni, were sent back to Macao. It was not until the next year, through the help of officials who were friends of Aleni, that the churches were restored and the mission re-established.

In 1641, Aleni was made vice-provincial and superior over all the Jesuits in south China. There were between sixty and seventy thousand Christians in all of China, and the most flourishing missions were those of the provinces of Shaanxi and Fujian, both of which had been founded by Aleni.

By this time, the Ming dynasty was about to fall. Major peasant uprisings raged across the empire, while the Manchus stormed the gates. During the war of the Manchu conquest since 1644, Aleni took refuge in the

hills of western Fujian. Here Aleni died in 1649, at the age of 67. He was buried outside the north gate of Fuzhou city.

Aleni's missionary career conformed to the policy of accommodation with Confucianism laid down by Ricci after years of trial and error, and was in many ways parallel to Ricci's ways during the 1590's. Aleni's Chinese name, Ai Rulue, a clever transcription which literally means 'Ai of Confucian talent', reflects this policy.

How did Aleni and his confreres go about their work of evangelization? Not by street-corner preaching, the Jesuits had decided earlier, for that was considered vulgar by the scholar-official class, and it could all too easily lead to a disturbance of the public peace and criminal persecution. Rather, the Jesuits chose to cultivate individual or small groups of literati with learned conversations and discussions. A missionary would be first an adjunct, later a member, of the educated circles of a city. He would raise and answer questions of a philosophical or religious nature, pass around literature, pay courtesy calls, attend literary gatherings or banquets, and do most other things that an upright scholar would do, and quietly let his broad learning and his virtuous behaviour be known. Soon people would make further enquiries, and then the more direct work of winning converts would start.

There are a few extant books recording Aleni's answers to Chinese scholars and officials' questions about European life or learning, and about the Christian religion. One of these books was based on a friendly debate between Aleni and Ye, in which the missionary tried to demonstrate the Christian doctrine of the immortality of the human soul. This discussion with Ye was probably typical of many other discussions Aleni had with scholar-officials in Fujian and elsewhere. During his Fujian years, a relatively stable residence enabled him to make many local friends and he became a noted local personality. The Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris preserves a collection of poems dating from these years addressed by some 71 literati to the 'gentlemen from the Great West', especially to Aleni. These verse-writers represent a most diversified group, from grand secretaries to obscure personalities, from staunch Donglin supporters to some who were tinged with Eunuch partisanship. Most of them do not seem to have been Christians. Whether or not these poems represented 'typical' opinion among the literati, the writers themselves are unanimous in their praise of Aleni and the other Jesuits for their courage in crossing the oceans, for their evident virtue, and for their profound learning and enlightening insights. There is also a proclamation by a county magistrate and the brother of the Donglin martyr Zuo Guangdou, dated 1640. In it, Zou announces his admiration for Aleni as one of the most distinguished of the Western scholars, whose books shock one out of worldly delusions. "The emperors honour (the missionaries); worthy scholars and officials love and respect them. That is because their teachings are proper, their

self-discipline and cultivation strict, and their love for other people earnest." He concluded by urging the people in the county of his charge to pay attention to the Christian publications and teachings.

Not only friends, but also professed enemies, testified to the popularity of Aleni and the other Jesuits. One Confucian felt threatened by the rapid proliferation of the followers of Ricci and Aleni, and condemned in two tracts their teaching as heterodox. But however violent his language, this writer did not once mention any less than honourable behaviour on the part of the missionaries. Another anti-Christian tract by a literatus of Fuzhou bears witness to the fame and good reputation of Aleni. "Recently there has been a barbarian from the Great Western Country who arrived here by sea to teach the serving of Heaven. His titles seem most respectable; his teachings are most clear and logical, his personal conduct is unimpeachable. He refutes Buddhism and Taoism, but honours Confucius. There are those who like his teachings and believe them, and even refer to him as the Sage reborn..."

PUBLICATIONS

Aleni's ministry took the form not only of personal contacts and discussions, but also of writing and publications. He was a prolific writer, and wrote with a good classical Chinese style. Among his works were a biography of Ricci, abbreviated translations of the Old and New Testaments, illustrations from the lives of Mary and Jesus, devotional tracts, a textbook of geometry, collected sermons and discussions (already mentioned), and the first global geography, a summary of Western learning, and an Aristotelian psychology. He was in fact one of the most important early transmitters of Western learning to China, and was an active participant in the effort by Jesuits and Chinese Christians to produce a library of Christian learning in Chinese. The result of that enterprise, the First Collection of Heavenly Learning (Tian xue chu han) remains to this day as a monument to the history of Sino-Western cultural exchange.