

EAST MEETS WEST: The Jesuits In China (1582-1773)

A report of a Symposium

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INTRODUCTION

The symposium EAST MEETS WEST: THE JESUITS IN CHINA (1582-1773), held at Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois from October 7-10, 1982, was a gathering of scholars eager to share with their audience the fruits of many years of research and teaching. Speakers were men and women well versed in the fields of Chinese history, literature, language and related subjects. While the centre of interest was Matteo Ricci whose fourth centenary of entrance into China was being commemorated, the presentations covered a wider range of subjects: Ricci's predecessors; missionaries who followed him; the accomplishments of Ricci and other Jesuits in cartography, translations, mathematics; the role and methodology of the missionaries. The entire gamut of Jesuit endeavor in China from

the time of Francis Xavier until the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773 was discussed at this symposium of two and a half days.

Rather than attempt to record all the presentations and discussions in this article, I would like to select some ideas that seem to me to be particularly relevant to persons today who desire to be bridge-builders between East and West.

CULTURAL ACCOMMODATION

The method of cultural accommodation adapted by the Jesuits in China dated from Francis Xavier's time. Francis' experience in Japan made him more sophisticated than previously. In fleeing restrictions created by reliance on the protection of the Portuguese colonizers he met

other limitations, particularly in a language which had no terminology for Christian concepts. Francis' conviction that the key to Japan's conversion lay in the conversion of China and that future missionaries must be men of high morality and learned enough to understand philosophical differences set the tone for the following decades of Jesuit missionary endeavor.

This was the basis for Ricci's early conviction that only if Christianity were put to the Chinese intelligently and rationally, and not concomitant with other cultures, would the Chinese be convinced of its worth. Realizing that Confucianism was an organic world view, he presented Christianity in the same way. He tried to identify the essence of Confucianism, not to the exclusion of religiosity and spirituality, but rather in order to avoid complex and controversial issues until core values were more deeply understood.

Ricci was acutely aware that Christianity must be indigenized, that it could not remain "foreign." He early recognized that accommodation was based on knowledge of people as they are. In fact, his most outstanding accomplishment may have been his ability to perceive China as it was, not as it wanted to be seen nor as others saw it. For him and his companions, "understanding the Chinese" was a means of evangelization. As part of cultural accommodation, it included a serious and long effort at

mastering a new language, understanding a hitherto unknown people, with their thoughts, religious views and all that went to make up their world view and pattern of living. Ricci himself felt that a necessary process for acceptance by the Chinese included a choice of lifestyle, correct terminology and a high ethical code strictly adhered to in daily living. Analyzing the reasons for his own acceptance by the Chinese, he attributed it to: his ability to speak and write Chinese; his photographic memory; his mastery of science and mathematics; the objects of curiosity he brought from Europe; alchemy; and lastly, religion.

Professor Jonathan Spence (Yale University) described Ricci's cultural accommodation in terms of the "two ascents" he accomplished. The first "ascent" was in part geographical, a journey from city to city - from Goa to Molucca to Macao to Zhaoqing to Nanchang to Nanjing. But the more important "ascent" during this time was the gradual mastery of language: from preaching, to speaking without an interpreter, to reading and writing, to translating. A second "ascent" took place when, after eighteen years in China, Ricci went to Beijing. Again the external ascent was accompanied by another of greater importance, an "ascent" in sensitivity. Through studying Confucianism, Ricci gave up his dreams of thousands of converts and became reconciled to slow work with a few Chinese scholars.

Ricci had early concluded that the Chinese would not change their ways, the Westerner must change his. This was both challenging and difficult and he spoke of it as "putting on new clothes and customs." Those who together with him deliberately chose this method also needed to be willing to accept the fact that this was a long term endeavor. The quality of conversion was most important, and the long term process more important than short term results. Ricci's writings attest to the personal and mental anguish that accompanied his outward success. But they also indicate that his second "ascent" was accompanied by a growing wisdom and wonder. When he reached Beijing in 1601, he "burst into song" with his pen. In one of eight extant songs written by Ricci, he writes, "Change yourself rather than change your dwelling." This he set out to do and it is what he accomplished before his death.

As the socio-political climate of China changed, later Jesuits changed their strategies while keeping to the principles of cultural accommodation. The shift from courting the Confucian literati to gaining the favor of the Emperor was a decision based on strategy. The Manchu dynasty had replaced the Ming and the climate had changed. Imperial favor became the "secret" to win freedom of movement in the provinces and toleration for Christianity. This continuing adaptation to changing

circumstances was an integral part of the Jesuit mission methods. So too was the collective and cohesive manner of their work. Each generation of Jesuits built on the efforts of the previous one, in cartography, science, preaching. Moreover, their projects more often than not were corporate ones. This too was a deliberate use of strategy in their choice and acceptance of the method of cultural accommodation.

A final remark about cultural accomodation is gleaned from the comments of Fr. Peter Hu (FuJen, Taipei). He said, "There is an essential distinction between accomodation and inculturation. Accomodation refers to external changes. Inculturation refers to a faith-experience coming from deep within a people. When the Chinese can reflect on the Scriptures from within their own experience of 5,000 years, then we will have 'Chinese Christianity.'"

THE MISSIONERS' QUALIFICATIONS AND THE EARLY CONVERTS

In commenting on the importance of the qualifications of the religious mediators, Professor Yuming Shaw (University of Notre Dame) noted that the intellectual prowess and moral integrity of the sixteenth and seventeenth century missionaries was superior to that of many who followed them in later centuries. He felt, for example, that standards were not so high in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when

missioners to China were not chosen as carefully as business managers of the same period. The quality of their work, therefore, could not match that of the earlier missionaries.

Xavier had emphasized that future missionaries to China must be persons of high intelligence and impeccable morality. The early missionaries' accomplishments in mathematics and science, translation of scientific and other books into Chinese, feats of surveying and cartography, testify to their intellectual abilities. More importantly, their moral rectitude was cited constantly by their contemporaries as one of the elements they found most attractive. Even those who chose not to become Christian were impressed with the Jesuits' moral and intellectual qualities. They were admired also for their fortitude and openness, their understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture, their ability to win confidence and establish lasting friendships. This last mentioned amazed some of the Chinese who asked, "How can foreign barbarians do this?"

Christian morality as seen in the lives of the Jesuits was an important factor in the conversion of some of the early Chinese Christians. Professor William Peterson (Princeton University), speaking of three of the best known of Ricci's converts, said that Yang Tingyun sought moral certitude and found it in the faith of

his friend Ricci. Li Zhizao considered Ricci the "perfected man," compatible with heaven but not foreign to man. Xu Guangxi too, was attracted by Ricci's strength of character. While the "learning from heaven" came at a critical time in each of these men's lives and other factors also were present, nevertheless, an important element in each one's conversion was that each found a moral discipline based on an external source and exemplified in the lives of Ricci and his companions.

In a spirited response to lecturers who had emphasized the importance of the learning and moral rectitude of the Jesuit missionaries, Fr. Peter Hu stressed that the usefulness of the Western sciences and the exemplary lives of the Jesuits were not the only reasons that Chinese literati accepted Christianity. He argued that there were religious and theological elements present as well, and that the authenticity of the early converts must be judged also by the religious experience of both converts and missionaries. For Jesuits, he said, spirituality is necessarily based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, basic to which is a notion of the Creator as a personal God, not just a "Source of Morality," and deep faith in the Incarnation which carries with it a decision to follow Jesus as a person, not as an abstract concept. Fr. Hu maintained that this foundation must have been passed on to the early converts, who also would have been drawn to a personal God and the

person of Jesus His Son. Another lecturer wondered if Ricci would not have found in the praise, admiration and imitation of Confucius highlighted in the Analects a helpful way to lead his converts to the imitation of Christ.

QUESTIONS AND DOUBTS

While the strengths and positive aspects of the Jesuit endeavor were emphasized throughout the symposium, some lecturers also discussed weaknesses and raised questions.

The most questions were raised regarding Ricci's emphasis on the superiority of Christian morality. He claimed that Christian ethics complemented rather than contradicted Confucian ethics and therefore Christianity was as morally persuasive as Confucianism. This emphasis was termed the "Achilles' heel" of Ricci's approach by Professor Joseph Sebes, S.J. (Georgetown University), who said that Christian behavior did not always carry out the high moral code presented to the Chinese converts by the Jesuits. Later followers proved that the Christian moral ethic was not absolute, that not all Catholics were men and women of morality. In relation to this subject, Professor Edwin van Kley (Calvin College) asked, "What if Xu and the early Christians had visited Macao or even Europe? Would they have remained Christian? Would Christianity have been as attractive to later Chinese who

knew more about Christian colonial powers? Was Ricci wise to guarantee that Christianity had an ironclad moral code? Was not this emphasized too much?"

Questions too were asked about the depth of understanding of Confucianism possessed by Ricci and his companions. Bernard Luk Hung-kay (Hong Kong University) queried, "Did the missionaries actually understand Confucianism? Records of conversations between Chinese literati and Western missionaries indicate wide gaps in understanding, in fact, an immense lack of mutual understanding each of the other." The same doubts led other speakers to ask, "Did the Chinese converts really know the choices implied in becoming Christian? Did they really become Christian?" Some contemporaries, among them Jesuits, had doubts.

Many literati, impressed with the personal qualities of the scholar-missioners, were not equally impressed with their teachings. The missionaries' moral and intellectual qualities were admired, but their Christian teaching did not add to Confucian philosophy.

Professor van Kley concluded that Christianity was attractive to some Chinese of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries because they saw it primarily in pursuit of an old Confucian goal: a virtuous people and a harmonious society. Professor John Witek, S.J. (Georgetown University) agreed. He felt

that the Edict of Toleration of 1692 was issued because the Emperor saw Christianity as a promoter of general good conduct and harmony in Chinese society, not because of any inherent correctness or goodness. On the contrary, the Chinese would judge Christianity on Confucian grounds and it would be found wanting.

However, there was a meeting of hearts in everyone's agreement for the need for moral rectitude. And so Bernard Luk concluded his talk by saying, "Did the twain between East and West really meet? Most of the time it did not. Minds did not overcome the intellectual barriers. But the hearts of the Confucian literati and the Jesuit missionaries met in mutual appreciation."

Another speaker noted that Ricci's lack of understanding of and sympathy for Taoism and Buddhism would be questioned today. And, perhaps more seriously, there seemed to be little theological foundation for the Jesuits' choice of cultural accommodation and the strategies needed to carry out evangelization through this method. Yet their missionary methods did have solid theological grounds. Their approach to non-Christians and their understanding of "salvation" and "grace" agrees with the spirit of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans.

BRIDGE BUILDERS

The approach of the early missionaries was that of bridge-building. China believed it was the center of the world, yet they saw the Western missionaries coming from nations that were not vassal states to China. The Jesuits set out to help the Chinese understand that knowledge and love of Christ were more important than their science and knowledge, and to help the Europeans have a better understanding of an unbelievable, amazing country with an ancient culture, at a time when to most Westerners, culture and European were synonymous terms. From the start the Jesuits' contribution was controversial. They did not succeed in the conversion of China, and the Rites controversy eventually compelled them to change their approach and some of their attitudes. To some, the results seem meager. But others have preferred to judge that Ricci's methods were slow but sure. The advance of natural sciences in China, promoted by the Jesuits; paved the way for later Chinese efforts, especially in their attempt to interpret their own past. To some it seems that the more enduring consequences were found in the West rather than in China. For Europe came to know and understand China mainly through the efforts of the Jesuits. The comparatively mature perception of Chinese civilization which developed in the West, especially in France, was due in great measure to the Jesuits' endeavors. Their role as bridge-builders was crucial.

WHAT OF TODAY?

Professor Piero Corradini (University of Macerata, Italy) asked his audience, "What are some lessons to be learned? Today the West and Christianity face problems regarding China similar to Ricci's time. West and East meet again. The West still needs an approach to China." Professor Corradini felt that the early Jesuit approach offers something to those who would be bridge-builders today. In thinking of a new strategy, it is important first to remember that one must deal with actual conditions and possibilities, not desires or wishful thinking. In trying to build a new bridge between China and the West today, it is useful to go to China as wise and learned men, trying to understand the Chinese from the inside, helping them where possible to better comprehend those things needed for the development of their country.

Professor Julia Ching (University of Toronto, Canada) commented that the Jesuit endeavor in China cannot be separated from Christian mission as a whole. In China there never were conditions that would have brought total success in numerical terms. The elitist approach of the Jesuits did not allow for numbers, nor was there then or now a mass demand for Christianity. Moreover, a direct evangelistic approach could have backfired. Chinese rulers, always wary of mass religious movements, would have intervened for political

and ideological reasons.

Perhaps a more careful selection of personnel would have been better, not just scientific experts, but missionaries willing to choose decisively for the accommodation method as a better theological choice. This would have helped make Chinese Christians and given a positive approval to the development of Chinese theology. This should have been a requisite, not just for Jesuits, but for the entire Church leadership. Only this would have saved Christianity from the accusation of "cultural imperialism." Professor Ching felt that sixteenth and seventeenth century mission theology was a simplistic one, drawn up without deep reflection. The superiority of the Christian faith was presupposed, and with this went a post-Reformation theology, also taken for granted. History cannot be changed. But today there would be value in more research on those Chinese most representative of the Jesuits' work in China: Chinese Christians, especially Chinese Jesuits, including those who have left the Society and even Christianity. They have studied Christianity at close range. They would have much to tell us about Christianity in China, both ancient and modern.

The symposium closed with Professor Ching's challenging remarks: Chinese mission is part of a larger whole we are helping to make. Are we today again witnessing an impasse - post-Vatican II Catholic Church and post-Mao China?

The West started the encounter and also initiated new contacts. Ricci represents a live idea, a missionary one: this is the wholehearted acceptance of cultural pluralism as a needed element of Christian tradition.

CONCLUSION

One of the purposes of reviewing the past is to look at the present and learn lessons for the future. A review of the Jesuit mission effort in China in the late Ming and early Manchu dynasties reminds today's would-be bridge-builders of the prime need to be sensitive listeners to the people of China today. A deeper under-

standing and appreciation of their present-day thought-patterns, ideology, society, would indicate ways in which West can communicate with East so that East and West can gain deeper insights into each other's thinking, ideals, aspirations. Only mutual appreciation and understanding will enable East and West to meet in minds and hearts in the late twentieth century. Hopefully sensitivity, good will, courage and perseverance will overcome past misunderstandings one of the other, so that the words of the poet can be reversed and people will be able to say, "East is East and West is West and soon the twain shall meet."

A <i>buxen</i> —			
A <i>CABAR</i>	<i>cuo'lan</i>	<i>fini'gibek</i>	克, <i>nebelo'ano</i> 歲晚 青臘月
A <i>cabdarpusa</i> —			
A <i>cabar co Roguor</i> —	<i>chiu tan</i>		求得 竟得 <i>osmar'co pign</i>
A <i>cada paco</i> —	<i>cin' a' a'</i>		常常 樣 <i>sempre liing</i>
A <i>cafelar</i> —	<i>za</i>		樣 <i>inferior</i>
A <i>cafelador</i> —	<i>cui'qa'ki</i>		會搭的 <i>inferior</i>
A <i>calmarueto</i> —	<i>fin cin</i>		風靜 風情 <i>! wao fori'liar</i>
A <i>camar</i> — <i>jachao</i> —			
A <i>canhar</i> —			
A <i>caran</i> — <i>prope</i>	<i>chi</i>		近 <i>vicino</i> <i>la perra</i>
A <i>ca Rictar</i> —	<i>zei'nan, tri'no</i>		載 挑 掛 駝 <i>ca'arar</i>
A <i>ca Rictador</i> —	<i>hian' a' ki</i>		挑担的 <i>carretar</i>
A <i>cajo</i> —	<i>iu'ian</i>		偶遇 通達
A <i>catar</i> —	<i>cin' a' no'</i>		敬 尊 <i>reuerire</i> <i>la arant</i>
A <i>catamento</i>			
A <i>cautelare</i> — <i>TH</i>	<i>ti' si</i>		仔細 <i>cautuhik</i>

Ricci's European-Chinese dictionary.