

## *The Confrontation of Mythhistories in Seventeenth-Century Sino-Western Contacts*

---

*by Minsun Chen*

*(The following article is taken from the **Proceedings** of the 33rd International Congress of Asian and North African Studies (ICANAS, Toronto, 1990). This short paper appears in Vol. 4: Eastern Asia: History and Social Sciences, pp. 293-97. It is used here with the permission of the Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, New York.)*

It has been said that in the encounter between China and Western nations since the beginning of the Age of Discovery, China dictated the terms of contact in the initial period (from about 1514 to 1839), and the Western nations turned the tables by imposing a series of unequal treaties on China in the recent period (from 1839 to 1943). However, since 1943--or, at the latest 1949--a new relationship based on principles of sovereign equality and mutual benefit has dawned. Many books and articles have been written about the history of these three periods of Sino-Western contact. Recently, several collections of significant papers have also been published--the fruitful results of international conferences commemorating the 400th anniversary of the arrival in China of Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and the 300th anniversary of the death of Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688).<sup>1</sup> These publications provide new insights into the history of Sino-Western contacts, especially the heroic careers of Ricci and Verbiest. While the efforts of Jesuit missionaries in propagating the Christian faith in late-Ming and early Ch'ing, [Qing] China inspire awe and admiration, one cannot help but notice that they were then labouring under great handicaps. They were confronted with the insurmountable myth--or mythistory--of Sinocentrism which the Chinese then believed in and lived by. The greatness of Ricci and Verbiest lies in their pragmatic approach to accommodating the Chi-

nese reality with their missionary activities. In the process they and their fellow Jesuits also created a sort of Jesuit mythistory of Europe in China. This paper will offer some reflections on the confrontation of Sinocentric mythistory with the Jesuit mythistory of Europe in seventeenth-century China.

Professor William H. McNeill, of the University of Chicago, provides a new perspective on the study of cultural interaction when he points out that "myth lies at the basis of human society" and that "myths, moreover, are based on faith more than on fact." Furthermore, mythistory exerts a vital influence on human action.<sup>2</sup> So far as the Jesuit missionary efforts in late-Ming and early-Ching [Qing] China are concerned, the Jesuit mythistory of Europe was rejected by the majority of Chinese scholar-officials and Chinese rulers who were true believers in the Sinocentric myth or mythistory.

As is generally known, the Sinocentric myth, or mythistory, consisted of such ideas as: China was the centre of the world; its civilization was the origin of all other civilizations and superior to all other civilizations; the Chinese emperor, who was the Son of Heaven, should be respected as suzerain of all other rulers on earth; the "barbarians" should change their ways of life to the Chinese way of life but not the other way around; these barbarians should send tributary missions to China according to the prescribed regulations of the tribute system. The Sinocentric mythistory was first formulated in the Han dynasty, further strengthened during the T'ang [Tang] dynasty, and reasserted by the rulers of both Ming and Ch'ing [Qing] dynasties.<sup>3</sup> This mythistory was maintained as a living reality because no other nation or civilization was strong enough to challenge the Chinese claim of superiority until Britain defeated China decisively in the Anglo-Chinese Opium War of 1839-41.

Matteo Ricci was confronted with the Sinocentric mythistory when he entered China in 1583. To circumvent the tribute system, at the beginning he presented himself to Chinese society as a member of a Buddhist sect. After diligently cultivating the friendship of Chinese scholar-officials for seventeen years, he still had no choice but to pretend that he was a tribute bearer from the "State of the Great West" when he submitted his petition and gifts to the Ming imperial court in 1601. In the petition which his Chinese friends had helped to draft, Ricci (Li Ma-tou) expressed himself as follows:

Li Ma-tou, a public servant from the Great West, respectfully submits the following petition, for the presentation of native products.

Your servant came from a faraway land which has never before sent a tributary mission. From afar, I have heard about the renowned civilization of the Celestial Dynasty, and I desire to be assimilated into this society for the rest of my life, so that my life would not be wasted.

For that purpose, I left my native land, took to the sea, traveled for three years, covered a distance of eighty thousand *li*, and finally arrived at the Province of Kuang-tung [Guangdong].

Conscious of the fact that the great Celestial Dynasty calls for all foreigners to render homage from the four corners of the world, I therefore took courage to present myself at the Imperial Court. Respectfully I am presenting to Your Majesty the native products I have brought as follows: one portrait of the Lord of Heaven, two portraits of the Blessed Mother of the Lord of Heaven, one breviary, one pearl-studded cross, two self-striking clocks, one world atlas and one Western harpsichord. Although the products may not be considered as very rare, they are distinctive as being tributes from the extreme west, and they are presented as expressions of my deepest devotion.

Your servant has dedicated himself to the study of the *tao* (Way) since childhood. I am now over middle age; I am a celibate, having no children and dependents, and I have no worldly desires. The precious portraits I have presented are for praying for Your Majesty's long life, and for the prosperity and peace of the people. Such is my deep loyalty. I humbly beg Your Majesty to have compassion on me, accept my sincere devotion and the native products I have presented. Thus I shall further be grateful to Your Majesty's all-embracing kindness. Thus I shall be able to express my admiration.

Your servant was fortunate to have passed the civil service examinations in his own country and was appointed to offices.

I have learned the secrets of astronomy and geography. I have studied the movements of the stars and the measures of the sun. In all these I find them to be agreeable with the ancient Chinese method. May I beg your Majesty not to

take into account my lowliness but rather allow me to serve with my humble talents. Such is my great desire. Your approval would be deeply appreciated, even though I dare not covet such honour.<sup>4</sup>

When Ricci finally received permission to remain in the Ming capital city of Peking, he was treated as a tributary envoy and provided with a regular stipend from the Ming government.

As Ricci's successors, other Jesuit missionaries laboured patiently to convert the Chinese. A number of Jesuits served as well in the Bureau of Astronomy of both the Ming and Ch'ing [Qing] governments and made themselves respected and appreciated as experts and advisors. Their major goal of converting the emperors to the Christian faith, however, always eluded them because the emperors themselves were the mainstay of Sinocentric mythistory. It is recorded that after the K'ang-hsi [Kangxi] Emperor once had visited a Jesuit chapel and residence in the southern suburb of Peking, he issued an edict which said in part:

What the Emperor adheres to is the *tao* of (the sages-kings Yao, Shun, Duke of Chou and Confucius); what the Emperor believes in is the *li* of the singular Doctrine of the Mean.<sup>5</sup>

The K'ang-hsi [Kangxi] Emperor's statement reflected the general view of the Chinese scholar-officials. It also gave a clear indication that, as a Chinese ruler, K'ang-hsi [Kangxi] would under no circumstances accept the papacy's interpretation of Confucian Rites and Chinese Ancestral Rites.

Confronted with the formidable Sinocentric mythistory, the Jesuits subtly developed their own mythistory of Europe. In Ricci's Chinese "Map of the World" (1602 edition), he described Europe with the following words:

The continent of Europe contains some [thirty] states, all of which enjoy a monarchical system of government. They follow no heterodox doctrines, but are reverent adherents of the holy Christian Religion [Catholicism], which recognizes one Supreme Deity. . . The workers are skillful and clever

while the people are well versed in astronomy and philosophy. In their daily activities they are solid and honest, and have high regard for the five relationships. Modes of production are plentiful. Princes and ministers are prosperous and healthy. Communications are kept with foreign countries at all times while her merchants roam over the entire earth.<sup>6</sup>

Again in a letter which Ricci wrote to a Chinese scholar-official who championed Buddhism, Ricci further asserted:

In my home [continent of Europe] since we adhered to the Catholic religion one thousand six hundred years ago... there has been no war and no strife among the thirty states of Europe for one thousand six hundred years.<sup>7</sup>

This idealized version of Europe was also contained in Giulio Aleni's *Chih-fang wai-chi* (An account of the Countries Not Included in the Chinese Official Records), the first edition of which was published in 1623:

All European states, large or small, from their kings to the common people, adhere to Catholicism, no heterodox doctrine being allowed in their midst. The kings bind themselves by royal marriages and live peacefully generation after generation. Trade and goods move freely, and they never use selfish measures to covet what belongs to the public....

All government officials [in Europe] are well-provided with large salaries to allow them to have ample means for support and also enough for spending on charities. There never have been any corrupt practices. . . .

Taxes in European countries amount to one-tenth of the income. Taxes are reported by the people themselves and there is no hastening measure. The judicial process is simple. All cases are to be decided according to evidence. No punishment is allowed before conviction. The judges cannot ill-treat a defendant. Since laws are well prescribed, officials can neither exploit the people nor can they use their positions to take advantage of the common people.<sup>8</sup>



The idealized picture of Europe as portrayed by the Jesuits also found its way into the writing of Hsu Kuang-ch'i [Xu Guangqi] (1562-1633), a prominent scholar-official, scientist and modernist and one of the "three pillars of the Christian Religion" in seventeenth-century China. In his celebrated memorial to the Wan-li Emperor (r. 1573-1620), Hsu [Xu] defended the Jesuit missionaries who were involved in the Nanking persecution of 1616 with a statement as follows:

In Europe some thirty states have adhered to the religion [of Catholicism] for more than one thousand and several hundred years. In these countries the strong and the weak help each other, the rulers and the ruled are at peace. No one picks up a lost article on the street, and there is no need to lock up front doors during the night. These countries have enjoyed for a long time lasting peace and enduring stability. Even in such a condition, the people of these countries continue their personal cultivation and are afraid of backsliding so as not to offend the Lord of Heaven. This is because the Catholic religion really can make people good. The effects of this are there for all to see.<sup>9</sup>

It is largely through the influence of the Jesuit mythistory of Europe that Hsu [Xu] asserted as well that the Catholic religion could offer great benefits to China by "facilitating kingly government, supplementing Confucianism, and reforming Buddhism."<sup>10</sup> Further, Hsu [Xu] praised the Jesuits as:

... not only in deportment but also in heart wholly free from ought which can excite suspicion, they are indeed sages and gentlemen; their doctrines are most correct; their manner of life most strict; their learning most extensive; their hearts most sincere; their views most steady. These are the cream of the appellation in their own countries.<sup>11</sup>

Hsu's [Xu] eloquent account of Europe and commendation of the Jesuit missionaries in China eventually became an article of faith for the one hundred fifty thousand Chinese Catholics, as Hsu's [Xu] memorial of 1616 was finally engraved on marble slabs by his grandchildren in 1676. But among a huge population of one hundred

fifty million Chinese at that time, the Catholics were a tiny minority.<sup>12</sup> Most Chinese continued to believe in the views of the Sinocentric world order.

With the Sinocentric mythistory so strong and pervasive, the only pragmatic approach for Matteo Ricci and other Jesuit missionaries to adopt was a policy of accommodation. The policy of Europeanization which the missionaries from other Catholic orders had advocated and which the Papacy finally supported was doomed to failure from the beginning, as China managed to maintain her stance for a long time.

By the early nineteenth century, nevertheless, when the European nations were strong both politically and militarily, and when China's power was declining drastically, the Western nations finally had their opportunity to crush the Sinocentric mythistory to pieces. The policy of Europeanization had its field day from China's defeat in the Opium War until the mid-1940's. China thus suffered under the bondage of unequal treaties for a century. It is to be noted that ever since the middle of the nineteenth century, the Chinese have been busy reestablishing a system of sound basic beliefs about themselves and about China's place in the world; it seems they have made only limited progress since 1949.

## Endnotes

---

[In this paper we have retained the romanization found in the original article and added the pinyin for the reader's convenience.]

<sup>1</sup> These collections include: *International Symposium on Chinese-Western Cultural Interchange in Commemoration of the 400th Anniversary of the Arrival of Matteo Ricci, S.J. in China* (Taipei, 1983); *International Conference in Honor of Ferdinand Verbiest Commemoration of the 300th Anniversary of His Death (1688-1988): Conference Papers* (Taipei, 1988); Charles E. Ronan and Bonnie B.C. Oh, ed., *East Meets West: the Jesuits in China, 1582-1773*, Chicago, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> William H. McNeill, "The Care and Repair of Public Myth," *Foreign Affairs*, Sixtieth Anniversary Issue, (Fall, 1982), p.1. See also William H. McNeill, "Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History and Historians," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (February, 1986), 1-10.

<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang, Franke, *China and the West*, (New York, 1967), pp. 4, 22, and 111. C.P. FitzGerald, *The Chinese View of Their Place in the World* (London, 1969), pp. 2-10, 21-25.

<sup>4</sup> In Pierre Hoang, ed., *Cheng-chiao feng-pao* (Shanghai, 1893); Seraphin Coureur, *Choix de Documents* (Shanghai, 1895).

<sup>5</sup> As quoted in Wei-ying Ku, "Between the Court and the Church--Fr. F. Verbiest in the Catholic History of China," *International Conference in Honor of Ferdinand Verbiest*, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> See Lionel Giles, "Translations from the Chinese World Map of Father Ricci" *Geographical Journal* LII (1918), 377; Kenneth Chen, "Matteo Ricci's Contribution to the Influence on Geographical Knowledge in China", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, LIX (1939), 329.

<sup>7</sup> *T'ien-hsueh ch'u-han* (1965 reprint), II, 647.

<sup>8</sup> *Chih-ffang wai-chi* in *T'ien hsueh ch'u-han*, III, 1356, 1362, 1370-71. See also Bernardo Hung-kay Luk, "A Study of Guilio Aleni's *Chih-fang wai-chi*", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, London University, 40(1) (1977), 69, 71, 73.

<sup>9</sup> Wang Chung-min, ed. *Hsu Kuang-ch'i chi* (Collected Writings of Hsu Kuang-ch'i), 2 vols. (Peking, 1963), II, 431-32.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 432.

<sup>11</sup> George H. Dunne, *Generation of Giants* (Notre Dame, 1962), p. 132. The last sentence of this quotation has been modified by the present writer.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 212, 314.

