

BOOK REVIEW

Kouduo richao - Li Jiubiao's Diary of Oral Admonitions

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Kouduo richao: Li Jiubiao's Diary of Oral Admonitions, A Late Ming Christian Journal, Vol. 1. Translated, with Introduction and Notes by Erik Zürcher, Monumenta Serica Monograph Series LVI/1, Sankt Augustin, Germany, 618 pages, ISBN 978-3-8050-0543-2

Late in the Ming Dynasty, a small number of Jesuit missionaries began to work in China. They were highly trained scholars. What did they say to educated enquirers? What questions did their converts ask them? This volume records the encounter in Fujian Province from the Chinese side. Giulio Aleni (1582-1649) and a few confreres founded churches there in the 1630s. Li Jiubiao and his friends recorded their instructions from March 1630 to June 1640. They admired the missioners, above all Aleni, and their wise sayings, so they rewrote the notes in polished, literary style and published them in eight short volumes within a few years. These books survived the upheavals at the end of the Ming Dynasty and afterwards. Monumenta Serica has reprinted the original, and also this volume, an English translation. This is mission history from the viewpoint of the converts, a rare form of history.

The 180-page introduction would be worth publishing as a book in itself. The *Diary of Oral Admonitions* comes from a different culture. Not only Westerners, but also contemporary

Chinese, need a guide to explain the social background, literary conventions, and burning questions, of the partners involved in this dialog. The wide gap between subordinate pupils and an esteemed teacher did not stop the Chinese from asking probing questions about science, ethics, ghosts, miracles and religion. Critics of the missionaries were already publishing attacks on them. The *Diary* and other pro-Catholic writings (many of which have not survived) were printed to defend the new teachers and their doctrine. Zürcher's introduction and notes, plus several engraved illustrations from the 17th century, make the *Diary* comprehensible.

Aleni was well versed in astronomy. His listeners were amazed that the sun was rising in Rome when it was already past noon in Fujian. The motions of the moon, planets and stars, plus the causes of the weather and human health or illness, take up much space in the early volumes. The Jesuits painted an idealized picture of Catholic Europe, without mentioning Protestants, while the occasional references to the disintegrating Great Ming by Chinese subjects are all laudatory. Both sides came from cultures that stressed loyalty. Everyone was too polite to ask, "Is it really as good as you say it is?"

Later, astronomy and natural science disappeared almost entirely from the conversations, and the Blessed Virgin became a frequent topic. Questions of ethics, angels and devils, and the afterlife rose in prominence. Aleni was spending more time journeying to small Catholic communities, supervising more church property, and replying to more critics. The focus shifted from the academic to the day-to-day needs of practicing the faith. St. Thomas Aquinas (1224-1271) had a mystical vision six months before his death and then dismissed his theological debates as "so much straw." Nothing indicates that Aleni had a vision. Rather, running churches on the ground left him little time or interest in scientific topics.

To the modern reader, the biggest surprise in the preaching of the early missionaries was their consistently negative evaluation of China's popular religions. Aleni and his confreres never said one

good word about the Buddha. In answer to their questions (p. 305, 314), new converts must have been shocked to hear both Taoism and especially Buddhism condemned outright, as worthy only of dismissal, not worthy of detailed evaluation. The missionaries allowed no room for dialogue with error. Someone with only a limited study of the Rites Controversy will have read that the Jesuits were tolerant and willing to accommodate Chinese customs, while the Dominicans were dead against anything non-Christian. Aleni's harshness comes as a surprise. To post-Vatican II Catholics, he sounds uncharitable and unreasonable. It would be worth researching to see if other Jesuits in other provinces were equally iconoclastic toward Buddhism and Taoism. Yet the Jesuits gave Confucius and even earlier sages the benefit of the doubt. They distinguished the original teachings of antiquity from what they called later misinterpretations. Did government sponsorship make all the difference? Were the Jesuits simply being careful not to get on the wrong side of the authorities? Or did scholars trained in Latin and Greek find more in common with Chinese literati than with Buddhist monks, Daoist mystics, and illiterate followers of folk religion? This is an area for further research.

The English translation is excellent. Only a couple of usages (Ignace for Ignatius, Galilei for Galileo) look unfamiliar to North American readers.

The same map of Fujian Province is repeated at the introduction of each of the eight books. The difference is that the towns where each set of conversations occurred are highlighted on each map. Following Chinese tradition, Li Jiubiao and the other converts were careful to note the exact date when the missionaries visited this or that city, and they recorded the conversations in strictly chronological order. Thus, as the original compiler noted, the *Diary* jumps from one topic to another.