


11-2002

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Recommended Citation

Li, Bernadette (2002) "Western Missionaries in China," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 46 : No. 6 , Article 17.
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol46/iss6/17>

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Western Missionaries in China

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During the Age of Discovery, Europe was driven by ambition for empire as well as the evangelical zeal to convert the non-Western world to Christianity. In that prevailing spirit, Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) went to China and had an impact on both Western and Chinese history. Though not the first, he certainly was the most important and most admired Western missionary in China. No discussion of missionary activities in China would be complete without a description of Ricci.

Born in Macerata, in central Italy, Ricci joined the Society of Jesus at the age of 19. Later, he studied mathematics, astronomy, geography, and other sciences at the Roman College. In 1582, sent by the Jesuit Society, Ricci went to China. He first arrived in Macao, and then proceeded to Zhaoqing and Shaozhou (now Shaoguan). Unable to enter Beijing, he settled in Nanjing. In 1601, he was given permission to stay in Beijing.

Ricci's success rested upon a number of factors. First, he was genuinely interested in Chinese civilization, and he pleased the Chinese authorities and scholars by saying constantly that he had come to China in order to study the teachings of the wise men of China and to share the blessings of Chinese civilization. He dressed himself in Chinese scholars' attire, enjoyed being with Chinese friends, and even proclaimed that he wanted to become Chinese. According to him, Confucian teachings were compatible with Christianity, although he opposed Buddhism and Taoism. He upheld that Chinese ancestor worship and many other rites were not incompatible with Christianity, a conception which many other missionaries were unwilling to accept.

Ricci fascinated the Chinese with his production of a "Great Map of Ten Thousand Countries," which showed China as the center of the world. He also brought the first globe, and determined the longitudes and latitudes of some of China's eastern cities, thus initiating a new stage in China's cartography.

A prolific writer, Ricci wrote several books in classical Chinese, with the assistance of some of his Chinese friends, for the purpose of spreading his knowledge and ideas; and his books found a wide circulation among the Chinese literati. Consequently, before the 20th century, Ricci was better known in China than in Europe.

In his prolific letters, reports, and journals to his superiors and colleagues in Europe, Ricci described in glowing terms Chinese intellectual accomplishments. While Marco Polo was the pioneer in relating China's material splendors to Europeans, Ricci was his counterpart in the intellectual realm and hence he has been regarded by many as the originator of Western Sinology.

The Jesuit mission continued after Ricci's death. Their knowledge of mathematics, astronomy, especially the manufacture of cannons, made them indispensable to the declining Ming court, which was threatened by the invading Manchus from the north.

After the establishment of the Qing dynasty by the Manchus in 1644, the Catholic mission became even more influential, with direct access to two emperors, Shunzhi (1644-1661) and Kangxi (1662-1722), achieving what Matteo Ricci had striven for but failed to obtain, that is, a direct personal link with the Emperor. In 1645, the Jesuit Johann Adam Schall von Bell, known in Chinese as Tang Ruowang, became the Director of the Bureau of Astronomy, which was an office of the fifth grade, placing the man of God in the middle echelons of the nine-grade Chinese imperial bureaucracy.

Encouraged by his Jesuit superiors, Schall accepted the appointment as a means to convert the Chinese people to the Catholic faith, although the Chinese government's perception of him was as a useful technician in the fixing of the calendar and the manufacture of cannons. As long as Schall enjoyed the favor and respect of the Emperor, the Catholic mission continued. The Kangxi Emperor, who had extensive scientific interests, not only appointed the Belgian Jesuit Ferdinand Verbist as Schall's successor as the Director of the Bureau of Astronomy, but also held frequent discussions with other learned Jesuit Fathers. Some of the Fathers were entrusted with important tasks, for example, as interpreters and advisers on diplomatic occasions. Thus, under the Kangxi Emperor, the Catholic mission flourished.

The Jesuits were followed by Franciscan, Augustinian and Dominican missionaries, and also by secular priests of the Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris, founded in 1658. More than 100 foreign missionaries were active and located in every province of China. In 1663, Beijing alone had about 13,000 Catholics. At the beginning of the 18th century, there were over 200,000 converts, about 0.1% of the total population. The Catholic population was increasingly drawn from the lower classes.

Ricci and other Jesuit missionaries achieved their successes partly due to their strategy of being discreet and adaptable to the circumstances of China. They showed respect for veneration of the Emperor as the Son of Heaven, ancestor worship, and other Confucian rites. Other missionary societies, out of jealousy,

used this tolerance against the Jesuits, and their cumulative accusations eventually caused the dissolution of the Jesuit order in China; the Papal Bull *Ex illa die* of 1715 forbade the toleration and insisted on the practice of Catholicism in China in its European tradition. This meant that Chinese Catholics were forbidden to practice ancestor worship; even the broad-minded Kangxi Emperor could not allow this. Consequently, Christian teaching was banned in China. In 1773, with the dissolution of the Society of Jesus, Catholicism in China lost its leadership and China also lost its bridge to Western learning. In the following decades, while the West was making great progress in science, technology, and democracy, China relapsed into complacency, decay, and degeneration, making room for imperialist penetration and invasion in the mid-19th century.

China's Defeats in the 19th Century

The Qing government's policies to ban foreign missionaries continued until 1844. Before then, a few missionaries had attempted to enter China secretly; when they were discovered and caught, they were either executed or expelled. After China's defeat by the British in the Opium War, through the opening of the five ports provided by the Nanking Treaty, foreigners could enter the entire Eastern coast of China. By the Treaty of Wangsia in 1844, Americans gained the right to build and maintain churches in the five ports. By the Treaty of Whampoa of the same year, the French gained free propagation of Catholicism. The Treaty stipulated that if any Chinese damaged any French church or cemetery, he should be punished by the local Chinese government. In 1846, the Emperor Daoguang issued a decree, which not only lifted the ban on the propagation of Catholicism but also returned the Catholic Church's properties, which had been confiscated previously. This was a very important change in China's policy toward missionaries. By this, the propagation of Christianity, which had been officially banned for 120 years, became legal and open. However, at that time, missionaries' activities were restricted to the five ports, and they were not permitted to go to interior China.

In 1858, again defeated, China was forced to sign the Treaty of Tientsin with Russia, America, England, and France, permitting missionaries of these four countries to conduct religious propagation in the interior of China. In 1860, China had to sign the Treaty of Peking with England, France, and Russia, adding the new concession that foreign missionaries could purchase land and build anything at their liberty in all provinces of China. Through these treaties, foreign missionaries were authorized to propagate faith anywhere in China, and moreover they were not subject to Chinese jurisdiction but under extraterritoriality. Foreign missionaries did not realize these conditions would cause anti-Christian sentiments among the Chinese people. Almost every treaty clause involving missionaries attracted numerous complicated problems and disputes. Between 1860 and 1899, there were more than 200 documented cases

of missionary disputes. These disputes were not so much caused by doctrinal differences, such as whether Christianity was compatible with Confucianism, but rather concerned property ownership. For example, Church properties confiscated earlier had mostly been transformed for other purposes, and it was very difficult, if not impossible, to return them to the Catholic Church in their original form.

Secondly, in disputes between Chinese converts and local people, foreign missionaries frequently became involved and forced the local government to pass verdicts in favor of Chinese converts, and in some cases even unfairly accused their opponents. With strong governments and superior military forces in their home countries, some missionaries displayed airs of superiority and even arrogance in their attitudes and behavior. Some unruly Chinese elements took advantage of the situation by affiliating themselves with the missionaries and Christianity for their material benefits. Consequently, many Chinese officials and ordinary people feared and were angry at missionaries. At the same time, due to misunderstandings and superstitions, some charitable works conducted by missionaries were misinterpreted by the Chinese. Unfortunately, missionaries were identified in some cases with the imperialists and Chinese Christians were regarded as extensions of foreign powers.

In sum, in the second half of the 19th century, “religious cases” (*jiaoan*) cannot be understood as religious issues per se; rather, they were intricately related and interwoven with China’s foreign relations, political decline, economic deterioration, and social unrest. To Matteo Ricci and Adam Schall, and to the world before the 19th century, China was a giant empire with a refined civilization; whereas after the Opium War, China was a battered country and everything it had was subject to question and derogation.

When humiliated and confronted with a bleak reality, people tended to be irritable and irrational, so were many Chinese in the second half of the 19th century. China then was a volcano, any catalyst could cause a disastrous outburst.