

Jesuit Missionaries and the Transmission of Christianity and European Knowledge in China

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“It is necessary to be barbarous with the barbarians, polite with peoples of intelligence, of the most ordinary life in Europe, austere to excess among the penitents of the Indies, decently dressed in China and half-nude in the forests of Madurai.”¹ –Louis Le Comte, French Jesuit missionary in China (1688-1691)

The image of the Jesuit as a shape-shifter, has been argued to be instrumental in the transmission of European knowledge and Christianity to late imperial China, especially the period from late Ming to early Qing. However, when studying the impact of the Jesuits on China, it is important to consider four questions. How successful were the Jesuits at passing on scientific knowledge from Europe to China? How successful were they at converting the population in China? What factors led to their successes? And if they only achieved limited success, what obstacles blocked the path to accomplishing their goals?

Jesuit missionaries in late imperial China took great effort toward achieving their goals in the foreign country. A focus on the accommodation policy of the Jesuits does not provide a full picture of late imperial missionary work. By the early Qing period, accommodation no longer produced the effect it once had under the late Ming. The political and social circumstances at the time of the missionary works were unlike those of the earlier Ming times or those of previous dynasties. The Chinese were deeply untrusting of foreigners, and the activities of the Portuguese and Spanish merchants in south China exacerbated the xenophobic attitude of the natives. This coupled with the fact that the Chinese viewed all foreigners as the same, made life for the Jesuits, especially in the beginning, extremely difficult. The late Ming was more open to the different philosophies and religions because of political fragmentation within the empire. While the early Qing was also heavily fragmented, the ethnic differences between the rulers and the subjects made the emperors look increasingly toward traditional Confucianism to gain legitimacy and support. In the middle of the seventeenth century was the break and transition from Ming to Qing, from Han Chinese to Manchurian rule. Jesuit missionaries remained in

¹ Louis Le Comte, cited in Florench C. Hsia, *Sojourners in a Strange Land: Jesuits and Their Scientific Missions in Late Imperial China*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 1.

China and continued to be appreciated for their scientific and technological contribution. However, the impact of the political and social fragmentation on the two dynasties determined how the emperors treated the Jesuits, which, in turn, affected Jesuit impact on Chinese society. In addition, underlying differences between European and Chinese philosophies were obstacles that the Jesuits had difficulty overcoming. While the Jesuit China missionaries are most remembered for their accomplishments in science and religion at the imperial court, their actual successes are in fact minimal, due to a combination of political and social circumstances as well as the underlying differences between European and Chinese philosophies that made it difficult for many Chinese to accept European knowledge. The relatively limited successes that were accomplished could be attributed not only to the Jesuit ability to adapt to Chinese culture and environment, but also to the fortuitous arrival of the Europeans at a time of political and social instability in China that led the Chinese scholar-officials to seek answers in other available religions.

Ignatius of Loyola founded the Society of Jesus, the institution to which the Jesuits belonged, in 1540 with the aim of spreading the Catholic faith through the Gospels. As a result of the Protestant Reformation of the early 1500s, the Catholic Church lost many followers to the Protestant Church. In response, the Catholic Church launched the Counter-Reformation, sending missionaries out into the world to convert people. Among the primary targets for Catholic Church was China. The Jesuit China mission was founded by Francis Xavier, who, like Ignatius of Loyola, was from the Basque region of Spain. Although Francis Xavier's wish to enter China was never fulfilled, his efforts inspired fellow Jesuits. The first Jesuit missionaries in late imperial China arrived in the southern provinces of the empire in the mid-sixteenth century. For nearly 100 years, the Jesuits would hold a monopoly in Christian missionary services in China. Of the missionaries who arrived in China before the eighteenth century, the most famous were Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), known to the Chinese as Li Madou, (利玛竇) and Johann Adam Schall von Bell (1592-1666), called Tang Ruowang (汤若望). These Europeans in China undertook the arduous task of converting a native population that was suspicious of foreigners. China, unlike other places to which the Jesuits were sent, had a long history and was proud of its culture. Even during the late Ming era, China was still a strong country, and the most populous in the world. The society of Jesus had a policy of accommodation, but in China, this was complicated by the problem of choosing which elements of the Chinese culture were necessary to adapt to and which

ones could be rejected, for rejection of the essential elements of the Chinese culture would risk dismissal of the Christian faith by the natives.²

When Ricci and his fellow Jesuits arrived in China in 1582, the Ming dynasty was in decline. Culturally, the late Ming period had a looser sense of Confucian orthodoxy than it did in the beginning of the dynasty or during the previous dynasties. As the publication of the novel *Journey to the West (Xi You Ji)* by Wu Chengen demonstrated, this period was willing to combine various philosophical teachings and religions. For example, the *literati* identified with Confucianism, which became associated with status and power. At the same time, these Confucian scholars did not find it contradictory to also participate in Buddhist or Daoist rituals.³ With respect to science, late Ming was lagging behind contemporary Europeans. The astronomical advances of the Yuan dynasty's astronomy system contributed to the relative stability of the Ming calendar for almost 200 years. However, after three hundred years of use from the Yuan dynasty onward, the discrepancies between the Yuan calendar and the solar year was politically significant enough for the topic to appear on the civil service exam. In 1580, the Henan provincial examiner proposed a policy question to discuss astrology, mathematical astronomy, and the calendar on the provincial civil service exam.⁴ Chinese science had peaked during the Song dynasty in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. However, by the time of the arrival of the Jesuits, the early advances in science had been forgotten.

Benjamin Elman pointed out that, as the sixteenth century drew to a close, Ming China was not waiting for the Jesuits' arrival. It had already closed its doors on the world over a century earlier. The Jesuits were not the first Europeans to arrive in China. The Portuguese merchants who settled in the southern city of Macao preceded them. Macao had since then become the gateway into a closed China, and it was in this Portuguese colony that the Jesuits first settled in China. Relations between the Chinese and the Portuguese did not run smoothly, however, as evidenced by the wall built to separate the mainland from the Portuguese colonial area. Although the Portuguese merchants were allowed to sail to the southern economic center of Canton, the imperial government discouraged other forms of contact between the Chinese

² D. E. Mungello, *The Great Encounter of China and the West, 1500-1800*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 20-22.

⁴ Benjamin A. Elman, *On Their Own Terms: Science in China, 1550-1900*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 23, 64.

and the Europeans.⁵ The Portuguese “vulgar habits” raised the suspicions of the Chinese and made the environment considerably more difficult for the Jesuit missionaries to accomplish their goal. In fact, Francis Xavier had unsuccessfully tried to enter China several times. The Jesuits who came after Francis Xavier were admitted into China three times, but had failed to establish a church due to suspicions against them.⁶

Matteo Ricci wrote of the Chinese attitude toward foreigners: “The Chinese are very anti-foreigners, especially afraid of Christians, because they found that they were surrounded by the Portuguese and Castilian (whom the Chinese think are militaristic).”⁷ The reason for this treatment toward the Jesuits was that, as Jonathan Spence put it, late imperial China had a “serene indifference to foreigners.”⁸ The Chinese did not see the differences between foreigners but rather had grouped them together simply as people who were not native to China. This was attested by the attitude of the Wanli emperor toward the Jesuits. The emperor bracketed them into the category of *huihui*, a term used most frequently to describe the Muslims of the northwestern region of China, but had also been used for the communities of Jews in China and the descendants of the Nestorian Christians who still lived in that region.⁹ For the Jesuits and foreigners as a whole in China, the most difficult lesson was to learn to be hated.¹⁰

Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, addressed his followers in 1553: “We should become all things to all, so that we may gain all for Christ.”¹¹ The Jesuits in China did not forget these words. A recent biography of Matteo Ricci by Michela Fontana noted that Matteo Ricci became Chinese in China so that he could appeal to the population.¹² Ricci himself felt

5 Michela Fontana, *Matteo Ricci, A Jesuit in the Ming Court*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 28.

6 Louis J. Gallagher, J., trans., *China in the sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci: 1583-1610*, (New York: Random House, 1953), 139, 275.

7 [法] 安田朴, 谢和耐等著, 耿昇译, 《明清间入华耶稣会士和中西文化交流》, 巴蜀书社 1993 年 7 月版, 96. Translated from French. Etienne & Jacques Gernet, *East and West Cultural Exchange and Missionaries*.

8 Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, (New York: Elisabeth Sifton Books, 1984), 122.

9 *Ibid.*, 122, 95.

10 *Ibid.*, 50.

11 Hsia, *Sojourners in a Strange Land* 1.

12 Fontana, *Matteo Ricci* 34-36.

that he and his companions were able to successfully convert some Chinese scholars because they were able to adapt to the Chinese environment by studying the Chinese language, writing and the customs of the people. When Matteo Ricci went to meet the magistrates in the city of Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi province, he did so while wearing the silk robe customary for official visits and a hat that was distinctive of the *literati*.¹³ Mungello in his book *Great Encounter of China and the West* placed great emphasis on the role Jesuit accommodation played in the conversion of the Chinese. He argued that subsequent Jesuit missionaries followed Ricci's method of reaching the Chinese people. According to Mungello, if Christianity were to thrive in China, it could not be seen as an "exotic, foreign religion" but instead would have to become something not only familiar to the Chinese but also "a force that transformed Chinese culture." Through their accommodation method, the Jesuits achieved remarkable success in converting prominent scholar-officials, the most famous of whom were Xu Guangqi (徐光启), Yang Tingyun (杨廷筠), and Li Zhizao (李之藻).¹⁴ Florence Hsia also agreed with Mungello and painted a picture of the Jesuit as someone who put on different faces in different environments, describing the multiple roles of the Jesuits in late Ming China, including those of a mathematician, alchemist, and Mandarin.

Jesuits in China played the unique role of introducing the West to the East. They learned to speak Chinese fluently and to write classical Chinese, the language used by the scholarly class. Although they had arrived in China with the purpose of bringing the Christian message to the vast empire, the Jesuits were remembered, especially by the Chinese, more for their role in transmitting contemporary European science to the foreign land than for their religious messages. Science was, as the foreigners realized, the best way through which they could impress the Chinese *literati*. In doing this, the Jesuits hoped that the Chinese would become interested in the religion that they had brought with them as well. Science was the bait that the missionaries used to guide the natives to the Christian faith. The most important goal for the Jesuits was the conversion of the people. Florence Hsia had remarked that if the Chinese scholars were more interested in French or Italian cuisines than in astronomy or mathematics, the primary focus in modern scholarship on the role of the Jesuits would have been the missionaries as chefs.¹⁵ Thus the subjects that the Chinese

¹³Gallagher, *China in the sixteenth Century* 154.

¹⁴Mungello, *The Great Encounter* 19-21.

¹⁵Hsia, *Sojourners in a Strange Land* 5.

were most interested in determined general areas on which the European missionaries tried to build up their expertise.

While it is undisputed that the Jesuits had a remarkable ability to adapt, a mere focus on accommodation leaves out other influential factors that contributed to Jesuit success and failure in China. The political situation in late Ming and early Qing China, the treatment of the Jesuits by the emperors, and the social problems China was facing played important roles. During the late Ming period, the Jesuits were able to befriend scholar-officials who supported and protected them. After 1670, however, the Jesuits depended on the patronage of the emperor instead of the Chinese *literati*.¹⁶ They had a difficult time separating themselves from the Portuguese and Spanish merchants who had left a bad impression of Europeans on the Chinese. As Ricci wrote to his former teacher Fabio de Fabii, “The Chinese place absolutely no trust in any foreign country, and thus they allow no one at all to enter and reside here unless they undertake never again to return home, as is the case with us.”¹⁷ In addition, it is important to realize that the converted Confucian scholars in the late Ming period were mostly those scholar-officials who were not against Confucianism, but rather ones who believed that Christianity could be used to supplement Confucianism. These scholars also believed that the science the Europeans brought was originally from China, but had been lost by the 1600s. These scholars argued that they were now, with the help of the West, rediscovering and recovering what was originally theirs.

The Chinese author Yu Sanle placed greater emphasis on the Jesuits’ role in scientific transmission than on the history of the Catholic Church in China. Yu remarked that the establishment of the Catholic Church in China led to the introduction of science. In other words, the establishment of the Church was the precedent and the cause that directly led to the transmission of scientific knowledge.¹⁸ Certainly the Jesuits themselves never saw their mission that way. Matteo Ricci had made it clear in his journals that his ultimate goal in undertaking such a difficult journey to China was to convert the Chinese, and in the words of fellow Jesuit China missionary Nicola Trigault, “to garner into the

¹⁶ Elman, *On Their Own Terms* 148.

¹⁷ Spence, *The Memory Palace* 54.

¹⁸ Yu Sanle 余三乐, [Zhong xi wen hua jiao liu de li shi jian zheng : Ming mo Qing chu Beijing Tian zhu jiao tang 中西文化交流的历史见证 : 明末清初北京天主教堂](#), ([Guangzhou 广州 : Guangdong ren min chu ban she 广东人民出版社, 2006](#)), 3.

granaries of the Catholic Church a rich harvest from this initial sowing of the gospel seed.”¹⁹ Jonathan Spence’s book on Ricci’s memory palace also demonstrated that the images and Chinese characters that Ricci put into his memory palace were for teaching the Chinese about Christian principles. However, Yu’s view shows that the areas in which the Jesuits’ contribution was greatest, science and mathematics, were the ones that the were most valued by the Chinese. In fact, when the Kangxi emperor allowed the missionaries to return from exile in Canton in 1671, he refused their request to spread Christianity, but continued to use their Western methods in areas of science and mathematics.²⁰ In 1692, Kangxi issued the Edict of Tolerance of Christianity in 1692 for the Jesuits’ contributions to cartography, astronomy, and military developments. Because they had not done anything suspicious, they were allowed to stay in China and Christianity was to be tolerated in China, just as the Buddhist monks or Daoist priests were tolerated in China.²¹ This edict indicated that the Chinese valued the Jesuits’ knowledge of science over their religion, and that this tolerance of Christianity was issued as a reward for their introduction of useful Western science to the empire.

The accommodation policy of the Jesuits was an important factor in their success of transferring scientific and technological knowledge. Through science, preaching of the Christian religion could also be accomplished. In order to maximize their success, the Jesuits followed Matteo Ricci’s three-step procedure to winning over the Chinese. Ricci suggested focusing on the *literati* elite, accommodating to the Chinese lifestyle, and combining the religious message with elements of Western science and technology.²² The decision to focus on the elite was made because communication was convenient with the literate class once the Jesuits mastered written classical Chinese. It would have been much more difficult for them to begin their missionary work among the poor, because many were illiterate and there was a vast number of different dialects. Moreover, the influence of the elite stretched further than that of the ordinary peasant in China. The missionaries had realized that with their small number, it was impossible to convert the entire population without the help of influential people.²³

19 Gallagher, *China in the sixteenth Century* 4.

20 Elman, *On Their Own Terms* 144.

21 Yu Sanle 余三乐, 253-254.

22 Harriet T. Zurndorfer, “Science Without Modernization: China’s First Encounter With Useful And Reliable Knowledge From Europe,” Paper for Fourth Global Economic History Network Workshop, www2.lse.ac.uk/economicHistory/Research/.

Of course, a key to their winning over the elite was cultural accommodation, which allowed Christianity to fit into the Chinese culture. The Jesuit missionaries who first arrived in China mistakenly believed that identifying themselves with the Buddhist monks was the best way to appeal to the Chinese. However, they quickly realized that this was not true, as Buddhism by the late Ming period had lost the elevated status that it had once held in the previous dynasties. In fact, Buddhism was one religion that the imperial officials tried to condemn. The Europeans realized that in order to appeal to the Chinese scholar-officials, they had to become Confucian scholars as well.²⁴ They accommodated the Chinese culture with regard to traditional Chinese rites. In the eighteenth century, they stood by the Chinese in the Rites Controversy, the debate on whether traditional Chinese practices, such as rites dedicated to Confucius and the cult of ancestors, were in conflict with the Christian religion. Two centuries before the Rites Controversy, the Christian attitude in China, dominated by the Jesuits, toward traditional Chinese rites was that they were civil practices rather than religious rites. Furthermore, Confucianism was described as the “sect of literati” and was therefore considered compatible with the Christian doctrine.²⁵ While the Jesuits refused to accept the blending of the three teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism as was typical of late Ming, they did use the synthetic method of the Ming. Instead of combining the three teachings, they sought to tie Christianity to Confucianism.²⁶ Because of this, the Jesuits tried to reconcile Confucianism with Christianity. This is best shown by the Matteo Ricci’s *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (天主實義), a book he had written in Classical Chinese, where he equated the Chinese term “Lord of Heaven” with the Christian term “God.” Ricci established that there was not a conflict between Confucianism and Christianity, since Confucianism was a philosophy rather than religion. For example, he reconciled between the Confucian perspective that man is by nature good with the Christian view of the man’s wickedness by explaining that human beings, when created by the Lord of Heaven, were by nature good. If they had let reason be the master of them and not be led astray by evil, they were essentially good and not evil.²⁷ In

23 Ashley E. Millar, “The Jesuits as Knowledge Brokers Between Europe and China (1582-1773): Shaping European Views of the Middle Kingdom,” Working Paper N. 105/07,

<http://www2.lse.ac.uk/economicHistory/workingpapers/economicHistory/2007.aspx>.

24 Mungello, *The Great Encounter* 20.

25 Fontana, *Matteo Ricci* 61.

26 Mungello, *The Great Encounter* 23.

27 Matteo Ricci, S.J., transl. by Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen, S.J., *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, (St. Louis, MI: The Institute of Jesuit Sources and the Ricci Institute

choosing the Greek Septuagint Bible as chronology, the Jesuits again demonstrated the need to accommodate Chinese history. The Latin Vulgate was problematic for Chinese chronology, thus the Jesuits received papal permission to use the Septuagint instead to fit China into universal history.²⁸

It was in the sciences that the Jesuits were most able to find followers, although the Europeans hoped that their advanced knowledge would attract the native Chinese to Christianity. When the Jesuits found that the Chinese Confucian scholars were interested in mathematics, astronomy, alchemy, and cartography, they sought to present themselves as experts on such matters so that the Chinese would realize the backwardness of their own science and be astonished by the Western way. This was the third of Matteo Ricci's guidelines. What Yu Sanle regarded as Matteo Ricci's greatest accomplishment was his translation with Xu Guangqi of the first six books of Euclid's *Elements* into Chinese in 1610 in Beijing.²⁹ According to Ricci himself, the translation of Euclid formed a good occasion to bring the "Chinese arrogance" in that the most important *literati* were not able to understand a work written in their own language.³⁰ In translating the work, Ricci and his helpers chose the title especially as a reflection of Chinese perception of math. *Jihe Yuanben* (幾何原本) literally did not mean geometry elements at the time. Rather, math was the "study of magnitudes and numbers" to the Chinese, and the word *jihe* 幾何 referred to discrete quantities or magnitudes.³¹

The missionaries recognized the areas of science that most fascinated the imperial officials, and in those areas, as always, accommodation benefited the Jesuits. Map-making was one of the areas in which the Jesuits had a greater impact. Ming cartographers were knowledgeable about Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Arabian peninsula after the early Ming voyages headed by Zheng He from 1405 to 1433. In Ricci's *mappa mundi* printed in 1584, the Jesuit improved the existing Ming geographical knowledge. Ricci's description of the Earth forced Ming cartographers to revise their understanding of the geography of the world. Through Ricci's world map, Chinese elite realized for the first time the position of China with respect to the rest of the world. Ricci introduced the method of latitudes and longitudes in map-making as well as the fact that the Earth is a sphere. Ricci's map and its

for Chinese Studies, 1985), 351.

28 Elman, *On Their Own Terms* 140.

29 Yu Sanle 余三乐, 9.

30 Peter M. Engelfriet, *Euclid in China*, (Boston: Brill, 1998), 289.

31 *Ibid.*, 1401-141.

later editions were included in geographical works of late Ming scholars, and the first Chinese map of the world printed in 1593 showed the influence of *mappa mundi*. Despite Ricci's introduction of innovative concepts in cartography, traditional Chinese techniques remained the most influential throughout late imperial China. Chinese maps still employed the grid system of Luo Hongxian rather than the European latitudinal and longitudinal system. And despite showing influence of European maps, world maps in the Chinese empire continued to represent China in the center, as was traditionally done. This was the case even when the Jesuits participated in the process of making the maps, because the missionaries understood the importance of accommodation.³² In the 1593 Chinese edition of the world map, for instance, China was placed in the center with European lands drawn along the edges of the map.³³

In addition to cartography, Jesuits were recognized for their revision of the Chinese calendar. Having an accurate calendar to organize specific economic, political and religious rituals was important to the Mandate of Heaven of the Chinese emperors, as it could affirm the cosmic order and demonstrate the authority of the ruler over his subject. By the 1580s, the Chinese calendar was already a matter of concern, although its problems were not as bad as the Jesuits had claimed they were. European calendars, especially after the Gregorian reforms that produced the Gregorian calendar in 1582, were more accurate. The Ming emperor realized that the missionaries could help Chinese with correcting the calendar.³⁴ But even with regard to calendars, the Europeans were becoming more adapting. Johann Adam Schall von Bell was in charge of the Astro-calendric Bureau that was responsible for choosing the days for rituals as well as for reading astrological signs to aid with imperial decisions. Schall had adapted the Chinese way of reading for cosmic signs during the reign of the Shunzhi emperor. When the Dalai Lama planned to visit Beijing in 1652, Schall's bureau was responsible for reading the astrological signs in order to determine whether the young Shunzhi emperor should meet the Dalai Lama in person at the border of the capital and escort him to Beijing. Dorgon, the emperor's uncle, wanted the emperor to escort the Dalai Lama to Beijing. However, Han officials at court opposed this arrangement. Schall's reservations about such meeting made him send a memorial to the emperor that "sunspots had appeared as an alert to the court that the Dalai Lama was

32 Elman, *On Their Own Terms* 129.

33 *Ibid.*, 127-130.

34 *Ibid.*, 64-65.

obscuring the emperor's radiance."³⁵ This report was based on the reading that the "planet Venus rivaled the brightness of the sun" on the day before and that a "threatening meteor" was seen in the region of the polestar that was equated with the imperial court.³⁶ A refusal to meet the Dalai Lama at the border of the capital meant that the emperor did not hold Buddhism in such high favor. Thus, Schall's goals were likely to have been to lower public esteem for Buddhism so that Christianity could be promoted.³⁷ The science and mathematics knowledge that the Jesuits introduced to late Ming and Early Qing China did impress the Chinese, certainly more so than the religion of Christianity, but through this focus on science, Ricci and his fellow Jesuits were able to achieve limited success in converting some of the scholarly class.

The successes of the Jesuit missionaries in passing on scientific and religious knowledge, however, depended not only on their own accommodation policies, but also on the political and social situation of China at the time of their arrival. China in late Ming was politically and religiously fragmented, although it was more likely to combine the teachings from multiple religions. The Jesuits arrived at a time of political and social instability in China, during which the learned class had difficulty keeping the orthodox Confucianism that scholars of the past had done for centuries. Due to this instability, the *literati* found solace in other religions, including Buddhism, Daoism, and also Christianity.³⁸ Officially, there was a tendency to condemn Buddhism and, to a certain degree, Daoism. Both religions by the late 1500s no longer occupied the strong position that they had held in the previous centuries. Interestingly, because the first decades of the Jesuit mission in China coincided with a Buddhist revival that attracted the *literati's* sympathy but official condemnation, the Ming authorities did not try to stop the Jesuit efforts to negate Buddhism.³⁹ The Jesuits benefited from the political condemnation against Buddhism. Since they stood on the official side, they avoided the official condemnation of Christianity and even received tacit support from the government on their criticism of Buddhism.

The instability in China ironically helped to spread the knowledge of the Jesuits. During the last years of the Ming dynasty, constant strife led the imperial government to employ those Jesuits who had much more advanced

35 *Ibid.*, 139.

36 *Ibid.*, 139.

37 *Ibid.*, Terms 138-139.

38 Etienne & Gernet, 145.

39 Zurndorfer, "Science Without Modernization".

knowledge on military technology. The missionaries thus found another way through which they could engage in the transfer of scientific knowledge and, through that, hopefully religion.⁴⁰ During the Qing, the Jesuits, having already won recognition in the previous dynasty for their scientific knowledge, won approval and patronage from the Qing emperors as well. Benjamin Elman noted that the two dynasties of Ming and Qing treated Jesuits differently.⁴¹ During the late Ming, the emperor did not take a personal interest to the Jesuits, so that the foreigners were able to go into the *literati* circle and befriend prominent scholar-officials. Through this, some officials were converted to Christianity. However, during the early Qing period, Jesuits had a much more personal relationship with the Shunzhi and Kangxi emperors. The Shunzhi emperor was so comfortable with Schall that the scholar Chen Mingxia wrote a poem dedicated the Shunzhi and Schall.⁴² Kangxi had a close relationship with Ferdinand Verbiest, who translated many Western works into Manchu. Both the emperor and the Jesuit shared an interest in science and Verbiest would give the young emperor daily mathematics lessons.⁴³ Such close relationships also meant that the emperors had a closer watch on the Jesuits, and because they were now part of the imperial circle, they could no longer reach out to the *literati* and were dependent exclusively on the patronage of the Manchu emperor. Under the first two Qing emperors, Jesuits such as Schall and Verbiest held high government posts. The Ming and the Qing differed in how they viewed the Jesuits. Both dynasties appreciated the knowledge of the Jesuits, but because the missionaries were farther away from the emperor during the late Ming period, they were free to form bonds and friendships with the government officials. This did not mean that the Ming felt the Jesuits were unimportant however, for when Ricci passed away in 1610, the Wanli emperor allowed for the 58-year-old priest to be buried in Beijing, a high honor for a foreigner.⁴⁴ During the Qing, the Westerners were less free to move through the *literati* circle because the emperor tended to be closer to the Jesuits. Losing favor with the emperor meant they had no supporters to save them.

Despite their efforts, the Jesuits in China had minimal success. They had managed to convert very few of the scholarly class to Christianity. The Jesuit effect on scientific development was much greater, yet even here, there were few long-lasting changes. First of all, the science that the Jesuits introduced was

40 Yu Sanle 余三乐, 89.

41 Elman, *On Their Own Terms* 148-149.

42 Yu Sanle 余三乐, 148.

43 Fontana, *Matteo Ricci* 288-289.

44 Fontana, *Matteo Ricci* 273.

more sophisticated than the contemporary Chinese science knowledge. However, the Jesuits stayed for a long time in China without going back to Europe. As Europe was advancing its sciences in their absence, the Jesuits could not have brought the most up-to-date scientific and technological discoveries. Secondly, other than the areas of science that the Chinese found most useful in administering the empire, China did not accept most of the European knowledge brought to them by the Jesuits.⁴⁵ In mathematics, cartography, and official calendar, the Chinese found European techniques and concepts helpful because this knowledge eased the taxation and census process, aided in the defense of the empire, and made sure that the empire was in harmony with Heaven. The combination of the two factors determined that modern European science would not enter China until centuries later. The Western calendar on which the new revised Chinese calendar was based was gradually replaced by the Muslim version. The members of the bureaucracy began to fear that Catholicism would undermine the foundation of the Chinese state should the Jesuits continue to be influential. In the later years of Kangxi's reign, the Jesuits were exiled, then pardoned and allowed to come back to Beijing, before finally being banned by Kangxi's successor, Yongzheng.⁴⁶

Even when the Jesuit missionaries did succeed in transmitting knowledge, this knowledge was often considered by the Chinese to be of Chinese origin. The term *li shi qiu ye* 礼失求野 literally translates into "retrieving lost rites from barbarians." The supporters of Jesuits often used this term to defend their decision to follow the Westerners. For Xu Guangqi and his fellow converts, Christianity provided a chance to supplement Confucianism and to rid of the incorrect ways of Buddhism.⁴⁷ Western learning, then, was a way to help the Chinese rediscover what they had lost, but what was rightfully theirs. In his preface to the 1611 edition of *Jihe Yuanben*, Xu lamented of the knowledge relevant to making an accurate calendar, that of measurement and numbers, which had existed in the earlier dynasties but which had by the late Ming period disappeared.⁴⁸ Xu's preface did not simply result from ethnocentricity. Historical evidence demonstrated that there has been old

45 Etienne & Gernet, 72-73.

46 Fontana, *Matteo Ricci* 287-293.

47 Liu Yunhua 刘耘华, [Quan shi de yuan huan : Ming mo Qing chu chuan jiao shi dui ru jia jing dian de jie shi ji qi ben tu hui ying 诠释的圆环 : 明末清初传教士对儒家经典的解释及其本土回应](#), (Beijing 北京 : Beijing Da Xue Chu Ban She 北京大学出版社, 2005), 322-323.

48 Engelfriet, *Euclid in China*, 291-292.

scientific knowledge in China that had disappeared by the end of the Ming Dynasty. One was the algebra of the Song period, the *tian yuan shu*, which by the time of Jesuit arrival still existed but was no longer understood by the Chinese *literati*.⁴⁹ Thus, from the Chinese perspective, the science and technology that the Jesuit brought with them were not new, but were rather old Chinese knowledge that had been lost or left incomprehensible by the Ming and Qing times due to instability.

One cause for the hostile Chinese reception of scientific knowledge from the West and Christianity was the fundamental difference between the Chinese and European learning and philosophies. Ricci and the Jesuits tried to accommodate Christianity to fit Chinese culture. However, by the time of Kangxi, the Chinese scholars were beginning to realize that underneath the carefully constructed bridge between Christianity and Confucianism laid extremely different perspectives. European concept about the order of the cosmos was one of linear chronology with divine providence. The cosmos was made up of four elements: air, fire, earth, and water. The Chinese, on the other hand, thought the cosmos was designed around an “eternally evolving Way”. The interaction of yin and yang sets the motion of cosmic change. Instead of four elements, the Chinese believed in five phases: earth, metal, fire, water, and wood.⁵⁰ The Chinese concept of *qi* as encompassing all matter worried the Jesuits, because such concept did not leave any room for the unlimited spiritual power of God.⁵¹ When Ferdinand Verbiest tried to obtain Kangxi’s permission to print his *Studies to Fathom Principles*, he was refused because the European learning through the method of inference, as taught by Aristotle, championed in the book was viewed as inappropriate for Chinese learning. Furthermore, Verbiest stressed the importance of the brain as the storage of knowledge and memory. This concept contradicted the classical Chinese belief that the heart is connected to the mind and is the determinant in intelligence.⁵² Therefore, Chinese scholars believed that should the Jesuits and Christianity be allowed to remain in China, their Western perspective could shake the foundations of the Chinese empire.⁵³ The missionaries had taken great effort to try to explain to the *literati* the scientific findings in Europe, but because the Chinese had experienced a different culture and philosophy, they could not understand this knowledge.

49 *Ibid.*, 99.

50 Elman, *On Their Own Terms* 118.

51 *Ibid.*, 121.

52 *Ibid.*, 145-147.

53 *Ibid.*, 146. Also see Etiemble & Gernet, 77.

The commonly held view after Lord McCartney's visit to China in the eighteenth century was that China was an arrogant nation. While this was true and the Chinese were very ethnocentric, especially since they believed that China was in the middle of the world, the Chinese refusal to accept Western knowledge, despite knowing that it is more advanced in many ways than the native Chinese knowledge, could have also stemmed from political situations. The very factors that had given the Jesuits a boost in their efforts to convert the Chinese also at the same time limited Jesuit success. In the eighteenth century, the Qianlong emperor faced the difficult task of maintaining harmony among the people while simultaneously promoting the military culture of the Manchus. He sought to present himself to his Chinese subjects as "thoroughly Confucian and ethnically even-handed."⁵⁴ His grandfather, Kangxi, may have met similar problems, and his response to these difficulties may have explained the fate of the Catholic Church in the 17th century. As a young emperor, Kangxi was close to the Jesuit priest Verbiest because he realized that Verbiest's knowledge of mathematics and astronomy was essential to the calendar's accuracy and therefore, the cultural legitimacy of the new dynasty.⁵⁵ However, the emperor was also feeling pressures from his officials to exile the Westerners, who could disturb the natural order of things in the empire. Kangxi, despite his strong interest in science, had to emphasize that the young Manchu dynasty did have the Mandate of Heaven, and that despite the ethnicity of the ruling family, the empire itself was thoroughly Confucian. The best way to do this was to distance himself from the Jesuits, whom the Han Chinese officials were suspicious of.

Studies on Jesuits in China have often focused on their ability and willingness to accommodate to Chinese culture and philosophy. Jesuits were known for their adaptation skills when in foreign lands. This reached an even higher level when they arrived in China, because China, as a nation with a long history, was unwelcoming toward foreigners. In order to be accepted by the Chinese, the Jesuits found that they must adapt to the Chinese way of life. The Jesuits themselves were confident of their successes in both impressing the Chinese with their knowledge in science and technology and in their efforts of converting the people. Historians have often attributed the accomplishments to the accommodation method.

⁵⁴ Joanna Waley-Cohen, "China and Western Technology in the Late Eighteenth Century," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 98, No. 5 (Dec., 1993), 1527.

⁵⁵ Elman, *On Their Own Terms* 143.

While the contribution of accommodation is undisputed, what truly determined the success of the Jesuits in China was in fact up to the Chinese themselves. The Chinese accepted from the missionaries the knowledge that they felt was most useful to them and were unreceptive toward those European concepts that they perceived as of no use to them. The political and social dilemma of the last years of the Ming and early years of the Qing determined how the Chinese were to act toward the Europeans. The period in which Jesuit activity was most flourishing in China was unique in that it included the end of an ethnic Han Chinese dynasty and the beginning of nearly 300 years of Manchu rule. Although still recognized for their learning, Jesuits under the Qing had a diminished influence on Chinese society and the scholarly class. As an ethnic minority ruling an empire that was mostly ethnic Han, the Qing realized that need to appeal to the Han officials in order to survive. Manchu emperors, such as Kangxi, therefore have often listened to his Han officials in matters concerning the Jesuits. In their desire to receive and maintain legitimacy in China, the Manchus moved the empire back to classical and more traditional Confucianism. Whereas late Ming was willing to synthesize by combining elements of Christianity with other religions, the Qing refused to let Confucianism be combined with any non-Confucian religions or philosophies.⁵⁶ Because Jesuits were foreigners in a country that was deeply suspicious of all who were not of Chinese background, the missionaries experienced decline in importance. Unfortunately for the Jesuits, the events of the sixteenth and seventeenth century ensured that Jesuit impact on the science and the Christian religion in China in those two centuries would not last as long as it should have.

56 Mungello, *The Great Encounter* 34.