

# The Jesuits in China



The Jesuit foundations in the Far East were the most important of those belonging to the worldwide missions. Impressed with the high level of civilization they found in China and Japan, the Jesuits felt an immediate affinity for Asian culture and sent their best missionaries to the region.

In 1582, the Jesuits moved beyond Macao to found their first permanent mission on Chinese soil. They would remain there until 1773. Combining rigorous scholarly training with an approach to mission work that privileged tolerance and accommodation, the Jesuits treated their encounters with non-Christian civilizations as a dialogue. Inspired by the recommendations of the Jesuit Visitor to the Indies, Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606), the Society of Jesus sought to adapt Catholicism to non-European cultural traditions. This policy brought the Jesuits remarkable success in China, Japan, and Mughal India, where the Jesuits' method of

## Of Rites and Wrongs

The Chinese rites controversy of the seventeenth century entangled Jesuits in Europe as well as in China.

### At Its Essence

The controversy was a debate over translation and interpretation. It began with the founder of the Jesuit mission to China, Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), and his attitude toward his apostolic endeavor.

Ricci knew that in order to propagate Catholicism in China, he needed to build on the elements of Chinese culture that he deemed inoffensive to Catholic orthodoxy.

The dispute began when Franciscan and Dominican missionaries from the Philippines arrived in Southern China. When these friars took a close look at the practices and attitudes of the Jesuits' Chinese Christians, they began to suspect that the men of the Society were permitting heterodoxy at best and idolatry at worst.

The two main sticking points raised by the mendicant missionaries had to do with common Chinese rituals practiced by the Jesuits' Christians. The first involved the participation of Christian mandarins in the Confucian ceremonies required by the Chinese state. From the Jesuits' point of view, a good Christian would seek to excuse himself but, if necessary, could attend these obligatory functions at "halls" to "revere" Confucius, just as one would do for a beloved schoolmaster. According to

the Jesuits' interpretation of the Confucian classics, the cult of the Sage was purely political.

### Honoring Ancestors

The other central issue in the rites controversy concerned the use of "ancestor tablets" by average Chinese Christians. In a culture where the cult of the dead figured so prominently, it would have been impossible for the Jesuits to uproot all manifestations of respect for the dead.

### The Papacy Weighs In

Pope Clement XI issued a condemnation of the rites in 1704 and moved to make his decision known in China. A series of subsequent condemnations of the rites culminated in a papal bull in 1742 that imposed silence on debates over the issue, a public rebuke to the Society that helped set the stage for the suppression of the order three decades later.

When the Vatican reopened the issue due to its concern for the welfare of Asian Catholics (prompted by the undeniable status of Japan's Catholics in the ultranationalist atmosphere of that country in the 1930s), the papacy reversed its position on the Chinese rites.

Figure 1. Juan González, *Saint Francis Xavier Embarcating for Asia, 1703*. Based on a print by Cornelis Bloemart. This work shows Saint Francis Xavier about to embark as preacher of the gospel throughout the world.



Figure 2. Painting of Matteo Ricci, S.J., oil on wood by Hubert Emmanuel Wan Hu, S.J. (Pinyin), 1616. Rome, Mission dell'Interni, placed in the Society's Casa profesa.

The most famous early Jesuit missionary was Matteo Ricci, an Italian polymath and intellectual who not only acquired an outstanding command of classical Chinese language and literature, but was also himself a prolific author of philosophical, mathematical, and scientific works. Ricci won the respect of the Chinese literati and by 1601 had founded missions not only in southern China and along the coast but also in Beijing. He made the most of his influential Chinese friends, and he donned the garb of a Confucian scholar.

The Jesuits changed their policy shortly before Ricci's death and attempted to "go native" in the visual arts, as they had done in dress, habits, and literature. The popular classes, by now the foundation of the mission, were more receptive to devotional art than the literati or the court had ever been. As a result, sacred painting flourished over the next 150 years, especially in domestic settings, where holy images came to adorn private homes and community chapels. As in Japan, Jesuit missionaries made extensive use of devotional pictures when they preached, and they circulated copper images, medallions, and rouaries among new converts, capitalizing on the Chinese commoners' respect for sacred or magic imagery.

Figure 3. Gavin Alexander Bailey in *The Jesuits and the Arts, 1540-1773* (Saint Joseph's University Press, 2005).

## How did the Jesuits learn Chinese?

The Jesuits in China were among the first Europeans in the modern era to study the Chinese language. Since their goal was to transmit a complex religious message to a sophisticated culture, they subjected themselves to years of study before attempting to evangelize. The first Jesuit to dedicate himself to studying Chinese was Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607), who acquired Mandarin laboriously by drawing him the corresponding characters. His successor Matteo Ricci, however, was able to rely on texts printed for Chinese schoolboys. Later Jesuits would use similar methods, benefiting from the experiences of their confrères who developed the first Western language course for learning Chinese. This course included readings and writing classes with Chinese and European masters.

Figure 4. Gavin Alexander Bailey in *The Jesuits and the Arts, 1540-1773* (Saint Joseph's University Press, 2005).

## Jesuit Mapping of the Chinese Empire

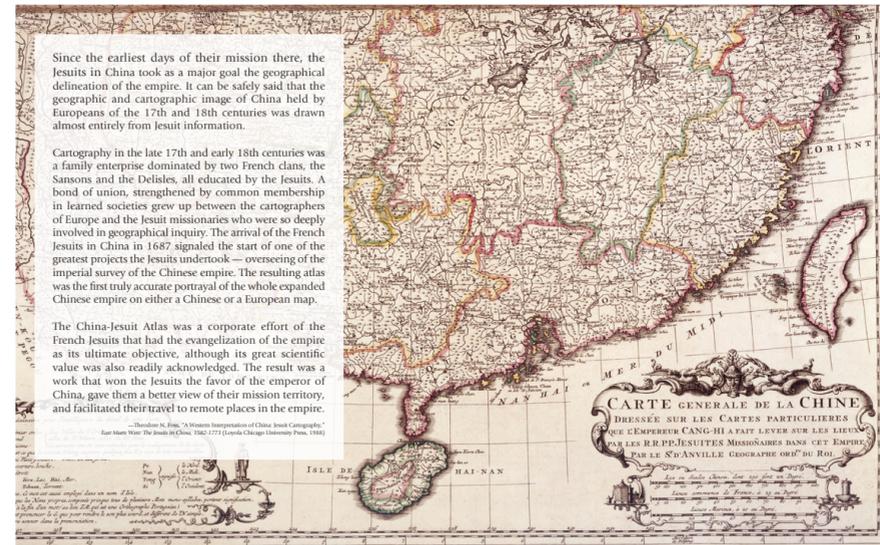


Figure 5. This 18th-century map is part of a large group of maps of China, Tibet, and the western coast of North America. At the request of Emperor Kangxi of the Qing (Manchu) dynasty (1662-1722), the Jesuits in China were the first to map these lands using scientific methods.

Father Johann Adam Schall von Bell, German, of the Society of Jesus and President of the Royal Highest Council of Astrology at the City of Peking in China where he, during Fifty Years . . . has Propagated the Catholic Faith

One of the most celebrated successes of the Jesuits at the imperial court of China was their role in the imperial observatory, where Jesuits such as Adam Schall von Bell established the annual Chinese calendar for the Emperor.



Figure 6. From Corneille Hazard, *Ecclesiastical History of the Whole World* (Antwerp, 1667).

## Clockwork and the Jesuit Mission in China

The history of Western-style clockwork in China is connected to the Jesuit presence at court. In 1601, Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) gave the first mechanical clock to the Chinese emperor, and from then on elaborate timepieces figured prominently in Sino-Jesuit interaction. The missionaries used these highly desired objects to gain imperial favor and thus obtain access to the highest reaches of Chinese society. But their role in the history of horology in China went further: they also introduced the theory and mechanics of the Western clock to the Chinese.

This would be the Jesuits' lasting contribution to Chinese culture, since this technology, which forms the foundation of many other machines, had far-reaching implications. For the Jesuits, the European technology housed within appealing decorative cases made these zimingzhong, or "self-sounding bells," the perfect link between science and art, both of which were in demand by the emperors, and ensured the missionaries nearly two hundred years of access to the Chinese court. To them, the Western mechanical clock was more than an object representing the latest European innovations: it was their key in a vast, closed empire that held the potential for countless religious conversions.

Figure 7. Catherine Pagani in *The Jesuits in China, Science, and the Arts, 1540-1773* (University of Toronto, 2006).

## Jesuit Art in China

The Jesuits actively encouraged the blending of Western art traditions with those of Asia. A radical approach at the time, it gained the Society many enemies from the other religious orders and the pope to merchants and colonial governors. Missionaries such as Valignano recognized how important it was to adapt Catholic art to the sensibilities and iconographies of their host communities.



Figure 8. Castiglione served as an official portraitist at the Chinese court, where he painted many likenesses of the emperors, their concubines, and their animals. Although this activity did not directly benefit the mission, it did guarantee that the emperor would be favorable to Jesuit missionary activity throughout his realm.

The most celebrated period of Jesuit artistic activity in China took place under the Qing dynasty during the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century. The Kangxi Emperor (1662-1722) was the first to include Jesuits in his imperial craft workshops, and he and his successors Yongzheng (1723-35) and Qianlong (1736-95) pressed into service any missionaries with artistic skills to produce novelties ranging from fountains and palace pavilions to enameled metalwork, ceramic ornaments, and clocks. The Jesuits continued to serve under these conditions only because their influence at court was essential for their now flourishing mission on Chinese soil.

Unlike the Japanese, the Chinese court and literati had little use for European styles in the visual arts. Largely unimpressed with the tricks of pictorial realism, one-point perspective, and shading, Chinese scholar artists found Western art to be interesting and amusing but certainly not art. Although the court was more tolerant of Western style than were the literati, this same cultural imperative forced Jesuit artists in Beijing to adapt to Chinese style.



Figure 9. Giovanni Castiglione, *Tsar Embarcates Presents Their Horses to the Qianlong Emperor*, detail from *The One Hundred Horses*, 1757. Paris, Musée Guimet.



Figure 10. This splendid painting of an officer in the imperial army was one of a set of three done for the Qianlong emperor (1711-99), and blends traditional Chinese portraiture, with its plain background and linearity, with Western shading and modeling. This unsigned painting is either done by Castiglione or one of his close followers.

Figure 11. Among Castiglione's most important kinds of painting were propaganda pieces celebrating the conquests and tribute of the emperor. Here we see the use of his trademark linear perspective.

## Jesuit Astronomical Observatory in Beijing

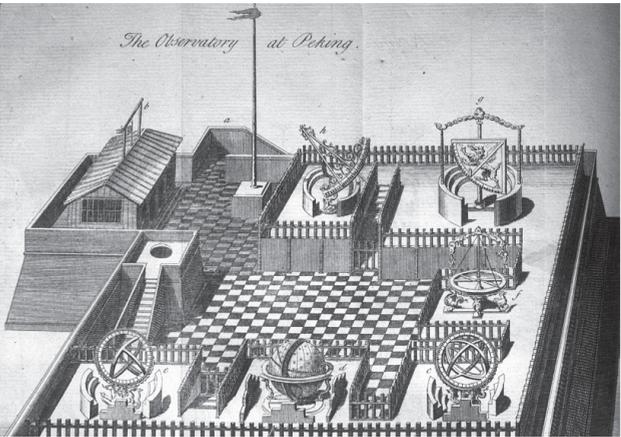


Figure 12. For over 200 years, until 1837, more than 20 missionaries worked in the Astronomical Bureau. On the observation platform, among the eight original instruments there, you can still see today the six that were made by Fr. Verbiest in 1673: the equatorial armillary, the sexton, the altazimuth, the ecliptic, the celestial globe, and the quadrant.

The fact that the China Jesuits were able to mount a missionary enterprise and sustain it for almost a century and a half in the Ming and Qing empires is a testament to the Society's ability to train its men and coordinate its proselytizing and pastoral efforts effectively. In their efforts to create a mission church deeply rooted in Chinese society, however, the men of the Vice-Province were virtually alone for most of the period. Had European soldiers and settlers rather than other missionaries joined them, perhaps their spiritual legacy would have been as enduring in China as it was in other lands where they established missions. Even so, vestiges of the Jesuits' presence can still be found from the foot of the Great Wall to the mouth of the Pearl River. Stop a bastion in the old walls of Peking, the instruments used by Ferdinand Verbiest, S.J., to calculate the imperial calendar sit beneath the same sun and stars.

Amid the bustle of Shanghai, a Catholic cathedral can be found at the site of the former family compound of Xu Guangqi, appropriately dedicated to Ignatius Loyola. In Macau, the imposing façade of the Jesuit church rises majestically above the old city. Curiosity impels most modern visitors up the steep stone staircase at this last site to see what are known as the Ruins of St. Paul's. There they spend a few moments contemplating the carvings of ships, dragons, and saints set in stone four centuries ago, or perhaps they glance at the vista of sampans in the city's inner harbor. For these travelers, a voyage has ended on the very spot where the Jesuits' journey into China began.

Figure 13. Liam Matthew Bruckey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission in China, 1579-1721* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

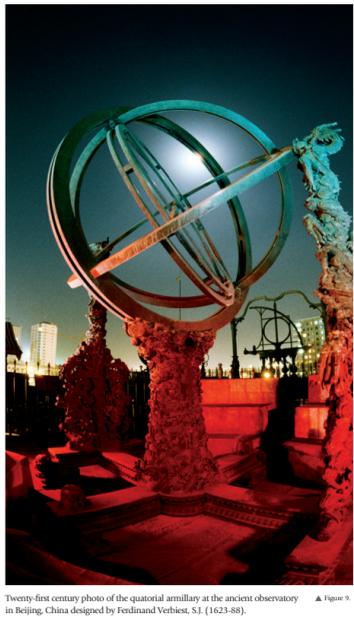


Figure 14. Twenty-first century photo of the equatorial armillary at the ancient observatory in Beijing, China designed by Ferdinand Verbiest, S.J. (1623-88).