

CHRISTIANITY ENCOUNTERS CONFUCIANISM: COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF THE MISSIONARIES IN CHINA DURING THE LATE MING AND EARLY QING DYNASTIES

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Introduction

In the history of human communication across cultures and civilizations, religion plays a very important role. This is because religion, more than a part of a culture or a civilization in which it is situated, often defines and distinguishes a culture or civilization. “Of all the objective elements which define civilization,” as Huntington (1997) noted in a thought-provoking essay, “the most important usually is religion,” and “to a very large degree, the major civilizations in human history have been closely identified with the world’s great religions” (Huntington, 1997, p. 42). Religion exerts strong influence on culture and provides “the driving forces in movements of social change” (Dawson & Weakland, 1968, p. 15).

The important role of religion is not merely confined to the constitution of culture and civilization; it is often the reason for the earliest encounters between cultures and civilizations. This is particularly true of Chinese culture, whose early interactions with other cultures were the result of religious activities. Of a wide range of religions coming to China since early on, Buddhism and Christianity have made long and hard efforts to enter Chinese culture and society. Buddhism was introduced to China in as early as the late Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.), while the Christian attempts to “conquer” the Middle Kingdom could be traced to the Tang Dynasty (618-907) (See Latourette, 1967; Neil, 1965).

These two great religions of foreign origins have met quite different fates in China: after several centuries of “fusion” and “adaptation,” Buddhism has been assimilated into and become an integral part of Chinese culture, whereas Christianity, suffering more setbacks than successes, has yet to gain a firm footing in the Chinese society.

This pessimistic view, however, does not reflect the experiences of the many missionaries who crusaded to China during the late Ming (1368-1644) and early Qing (1616-1911) dynasties. In the history of Western evangelism, this period was both fascinating and inspiring: On the one hand, “for the first time, real contacts were in fact made between two

great civilizations that had developed entirely independently of each other” (Gernet, 1985, p. 2); on the other hand, missionaries, despite intermittent harassment and sometimes persecutions by factions in the Chinese society, enjoyed an unusual popularity, exceeding their expectations. Indeed, when Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607) first appeared in China in 1583, they were taking a seemingly unfruitful path: long before them, were recorded the failed attempts of Nestorians in the Tang Dynasty, who had left virtually no traces of Christianity after their brief sojourn; not in the distant past, echoed the wishes of Francis Xavier (1506-1552), who never quite succeeded setting his foot on mainland. Within the next two hundred years until the end of The Society for Jesuits in 1773, China saw nearly 1000 missionaries proselytizing Christianity in urban centers as well as remote villages. Among them were towering figures such as Alessandro Valignani (1538-1606), Giulio Aleni (1582-1649), Nicolas Longobardi (1559-1654), Nicholas Trigault (1577-1628), Adam Schall (1591-1666), and Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688), whose strong influence can still be felt today. Coupled with this impressive number of established missionaries were tens of thousands of Chinese converted into Christians including upper-class literati, top officials, as well as one wife of emperor Kangxi (1662-1722).

Considering the deep-seated tradition and the dominance of Confucianism in the Chinese society and comparing it with the incessant hostilities Christianity encountered before and after, one would find this acceptance of a foreign religion quite surprising. It is a remarkable phenomenon deserving investigation from diverse perspectives. How did the missionaries in this particular period succeed in their missions? How did they thrust themselves into the Chinese society without raising some serious suspicion? How did they communicate with their audience? To answer these important questions, this paper identifies the communication strategies the missionaries utilized to avoid a direct confrontation with Confucian China and to achieve their missionary goals. It also examines the reasons for these strategies and their impact on Chinese communication with the outside world.

Context: The West Encounters the East

In the study of communication between civilizations and cultures, one faces a set of immediate questions: Why was it that one civilization or culture took the lead to contact another civilization or culture, not the other way around? Needless to say, this question can be answered from a political, economical, or sociological framework. Nevertheless, scholars find the geographic explanation most compelling. In 1937, Qian Mu, a well-known historian, formulated a geographic theory. In his *Chinese Cultural History: An Introduction*, Qian

(1937-1998) explored the differences among different cultures and civilizations. In his view, all cultures of the world can fall into three broad categories: the nomadic, the agricultural, and the mercantile. By virtue of favorable climate, precipitation, and soil, the agricultural culture is self-sufficient and henceforth cultivates a docile national character, indirect temperament, with its people lacking the motivation to explore and conquer other cultures. As an agricultural culture, China exhibited these traits in its history: it found comforts within its own territory only to be discovered and disturbed by people from other cultures.

The view that geography may be accountable for differences in civilizations and cultures has since become a prevailing and dominant one. In *The World Since 1500: A Global History*, Stavrianos (1975) elaborated on why China possesses the oldest continuous civilization in the world and why China has exhibited its cultural traits in communication and contacts with other civilizations. According to Stavrianos, China, due to its unparalleled degree of isolation from the other great civilizations of mankind, possesses nothing comparable to the Mediterranean which linked together Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, or comparable to the Indian Ocean which allowed India to interact with the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Instead, during most of its history, China was effectively cut off on all sides by mountains, deserts, and the vast Pacific Ocean. The significance of all isolation is that “it allowed the Chinese to develop their civilization with fewer intrusions from the outside than the peoples of the Middle East or India faced” (Stavrianos, 1975, p 24).

Consequently, changes in dynasties and cultures in China were not the result of outside factors. Rather, they came from within. For instance, the collapse of the Han Dynasty was not from a new conqueror outside of China, but was caused by political and ideological turmoil. In the Western world, however, a new conqueror from an alien culture often led to the replacement of an old regime, such as Rome conquering Greece.

More importantly, even when a foreign culture came to China, the perceived superiority of the Chinese civilization could always enable the Chinese “to assimilate or expel the intruders, and to adapt selected aspects of foreign cultures to their traditional civilization” (Stavrianos, 1975, p. 24). Never has wholesale transformation been imposed from the outside, as it was in Europe by the Germanic invasion or in the Middle East and in India by the Moslems.

More than facing a civilization sustaining continuity, resilience, and permanence, Matteo Ricci and his followers during the late Ming and Qing dynasties saw a strong empire in China. They believed the Chinese civilization was almost comparable to their own civilization, and to some extent, was even more advanced. The Western world did not

establish a convincing superiority in the material realm. Bairoch's (1982) comparison of shares of world manufacturing output by civilization or country during 1750 – 1980 can illustrate the point (See Table 1). In 1750, the earliest data available, China enjoyed a commanding superiority in manufacturing: its whole productivity volume almost doubled that of the West altogether. Considering the downward trend of China and the upward trend of the West since the 1750s as revealed by the chart below, it is safe to say that the missionaries saw a material wealth in 16th-century China far surpassing their own countries.

Table 1 - Shares of World Manufacturing Output by Civilization or Country, 1750-1980 (in percentage; world=100%)

Country	1750	1800	1830	1860	1880	1900
West	18.25	23.3	31.1	53.7	68.8	77.4
China	32.8	33.3	29.8	19.7	12.5	6.2
Japan	3.8	3.5	2.8	2.6	2.4	2.4
India/Pakistan	24.5	19.7	17.6	8.6	2.8	1.7
Russia/USSR	5.0	5.6	5.6	7.0	7.6	8.8
Brazil/Mexico	-	-	-	0.8	0.6	0.7
Others	15.7	14.6	13.1	7.6	5.3	2.8

Country	1913	1928	1938	1953	1963	1973	1980
West	81.6	84.2	78.6	74.6	65.4	61.2	67.8
China	3.6	3.4	3.1	2.3	3.5	3.9	5.0
Japan	2.7	3.3	5.2	2.9	5.1	8.8	9.1
India/Pakistan	1.4	1.9	2.4	1.7	1.8	2.1	2.3
Russia/USSR	8.2	5.3	9.0	16.0	20.0	20.1	21.1
Brazil/Mexico	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.9	1.2	1.6	2.2
Others	1.7	1.1	0.9	1.6	2.1	2.3	2.5

Original Source: Paul Bairoch, "International Industrialization Levels from 1750 to 1980," *Journal of Europe Economic History*, 11 (fall 1982): 269-334; Source here quoted in Huntington (1997), p. 86.

Conceivably, the recognition on the part of these Christian evangelists of China's superiority along with its long cultural tradition was behind the creative thinking of a set of communication strategies oriented toward "cultural adaptation," setting them apart from the early Nestorians in the Tang Dynasty and from the missionaries in the late Qing Dynasty. Granted, the Church took a part in developing this new orientation, it would be a mistake,

however, to think that from the outset Jesuit missionaries hit upon this formula or that they were unanimous in its acceptance. It was in China that “the first and most notable effort in this direction was made” (Dunne, 1962, p.14). In the course of their remarkable missions in China, the Jesuits blazed a trail of cultural adaptations, to which we now turn.

Adaptation: Garments and Appearance

The first thing missionaries decided to do was to make themselves look “Chinese” as a way to identify with the class of the learned and therefore Chinese culture. In almost all civilizations and societies, clothing remains a unique cultural symbol, embedded with a myriad of social meanings. Clothing reflects aspects of a civilization and is also the indicator of social strata.

An individual’s identity or position in a society was manifested through clothing in ancient China. It is in such a sense that the old saying “A robe makes a monk so does the clothing a person” finds its meaning. By the time of the late Ming Dynasty, this culture of clothing had become widespread and practiced in the Chinese society: “The social stratification in the Ming Dynasty was very rigidly demarcated and the differences could be clearly seen in housing and clothing” (Liu, 1988, p. 642). A strictly enforced dress code not only made rules for what garments were appropriate for specific social functions, but also specified “quality, texture, and color as well as the sizes of each part of a particular garment” belonging to a particular social group. For instance, as to the clothing size of the ordinary people, “their clothes must be 5 *chi* in length with the sleeves not extending 6 *cun* beyond hands”; merchants, servants, and other people of lower classes were not allowed to wear any outfit made of leather and fur” (Zhang, 1974, p. 1650). Those who violated the dress code would be severely punished.

Against this backdrop, the missionaries must decide to *choose* who they should be perceived by the Chinese society. In other words, if they wanted to blend into the Chinese society, they had to decide what kind of social identity they should carry in their appearances. According to Ricci’s account, “From the time of their entrance, they wore the ordinary Chinese outer garment, which was somewhat similar to their own religious habits; a long robe reaching down to the heels and with very ample sleeves, which are much in favor with the Chinese” (Ricci, 1953, p. 154).

Prior to coming to China, the Jesuits had had some successes preaching in India and they knew Buddhism, a religion originated in India, had taken roots in China. So, their choice of their outfit was more aligned with Buddhist monks. To their surprise, they later found out

they could go nowhere in Buddhist robes: they identified wrongly with Chinese culture, because, even though Buddhism had been part of Chinese culture, it was by no means the dominant one. This “misrepresentation” was not recognized until the year of 1595, twelve years after Matteo Ricci and Michele Ruggieri entered China. In that year, Ricci entered northern Jiangxi Province with a Chinese student by the name of Qu Taisu, who was converted in Guangdong Province. Born into a family of gentry, Xu noticed this problem in their wearing the Buddhist outfit. From then on, Ricci and his followers switched to the style of hats and clothes Confucian scholars wore.

Not only were they conscious of the garments they wore, the Jesuits were also sensitive to their appearance in general. They even made efforts to conform to the habits of the Chinese intellectuals cosmetically. When the Father Visitor of the Society of Jesus returned to China from Japan, Ricci advised that “he thought it would be to the advantage of the Christian faith if they would let their beards grow and wear their hair long, so they would not be taken for idol worshippers, or worse still for such as offer sacrifice to the idols” (Ricci, 1953, p. 258).

We should mention this change revealed Ricci’s accurate grasp of Chinese reality. Even before he identified with the mainstream culture in appearance, he already had a sense of the important position of Confucianism in the Chinese society. This recognition accompanied his as well as his fellow Jesuits’ determination to systematically study the Chinese language, Chinese classics, particularly Confucian classics, and to use the Chinese language to preach Christianity. The ability to communicate in the language of the host culture not only added another layer of “Chineseness” to their appearance, but also gave the Jesuits a degree of legitimacy for achieving their missionary goals in China. Emperor Kangxi’s remarks to one envoy of the Roman Catholic Church exemplified the crucial issue of language competency: “How dare those of you, who know no Chinese characters, speak no Chinese language, and even must resort to interpreters to engage in a conversation [with the Chinese], talk about the meanings of the Chinese classics? [To do so] is like one who stays outside without entering a house and discusses business happening within, which is groundless” (Quoted in Li, p. 77).

Now, dressed in the attire of Confucian scholars, making contacts with Chinese literati, Ricci was treated as a “Western Confucian scholar” and therefore accepted by the society.

Adaptation: Confucianism and Ideas

Catholic scholar Hao Fang (1969) once noted: If a religion proselytizing from its original location to different areas wants to win the hearts of the intellectuals in addition to those of the lay people in order to take roots, it then must absorb the local culture, cater to the thought, custom, habits of the local people. The first and foremost is “to respect the words of one or several sages whom are respected by the local people so that it can demonstrate that the new religious doctrines are compatible with the wisdoms of the ancestors as well as the original culture” (Fang, 1969, p. 203).

The Jesuits did just that. They made every effort to show the Chinese that Christianity was compatible with Chinese culture, even though they might think otherwise in their hearts. What then accounts for the essence of Chinese culture? It is the Confucian culture, which revolves around the writings of Confucius. As Liang Shuming, one of the greatest Chinese culture theorists, noted: “The culture before Confucius becomes canonized in Confucius’s works and the culture after Confucius flows from Confucius’s works” (Liang, 1999, p. 144). Confucianism serves as a key to understanding Chinese culture. Even though there are obvious differences among various schools, they share basic values and beliefs. It comes as no surprise that Matteo Ricci, after living in China for over 20 years, should emphasize that the nine books of Confucius make up “the most ancient of Chinese libraries, of which all others are a development” (Ricci, 1953, p. 33).

It is true that at the time in the Chinese society the three religions or schools of thought – Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism – lived peacefully together and had appeared to “morph into one unity” (*san jiao he yi*), but one should never be mistaken to think that they enjoyed an equal position. As a matter of fact, Confucianism had been dominant since the Han Dynasty. When they introduced the Western works to the Chinese society, the missionaries spared no efforts to accommodate Catholicism with Confucianism. They utilized such strategies as “incorporating Confucianism” (*heru*), “renewing Confucianism” (*buru*) and “excluding Buddhism” (*yifo*).

Incorporating Confucianism

Instead of starting with the Bible, the missionaries studied the Chinese classics and made it a “Western Bible.” They argued that concepts such as God already existed in the concepts of *tian* and *shangdi* in the classical works such as *The Doctrine of Mean*, *The Book of Rites*, *The Book of Changes*, etc. In his *Tianzhu shiyi* (The Meaning of the Lord of God), Ricci imbued Christianity: “He who is called the Lord of Heaven in my humble country is He

who is called *Shang-ti* [*shangdi*] (Sovereign on High) in Chinese” (p. 121). “Our Lord of Heaven is the Sovereign on High mentioned in the ancient [Chinese] canonical writings” (p. 123). It was a common practice for his followers to interpret and/or misinterpret the Chinese works from the framework of Christianity, attempting to forge an affinity between the two. Among them, Antonio de Santa Maria (1602-1696) wrote *Tian Ru Yin* [The Affinity Between Catholicism and Confucianism], which compiled 37 selections from *The Four Books*, *The Great Learning*, *Analects*, *The Doctrine of Mean*, *Mencius*, and *The book of History*, and “paraphrased them from the framework of Christianity” (See Chen, 2002).

The strategy of identifying Christianity with Confucian doctrines attracted some of the most liberal and influential scholars, who in turn became powerful and persuasive spokesmen for the Jesuits. For instance, in his defense of the activities of the Jesuits, Zhizao Li (1565-1630) argued: “Their religion [Christianity] is all about the service to God, which is exactly the same as our ideas of worshipping and serving the heaven and the sovereign on high” (Quoted in Xu, 1989, p. 172).

Renewing Confucianism

As for “renewing Confucianism,” the missionaries argued that Confucianism had been misrepresented by the later generations, especially by the neo-Confucians (*Xin Rujia*), so they wanted to revitalize Confucianism by reclaiming what it should have been and also by substantiating Confucianism with Christian doctrines. To their credit, the Jesuits had taken advantage of Chinese history in the construction of their arguments and interpretations. They argued that since the “burning books and burying Confucian scholars” in the Tang Dynasty, Confucian doctrines had never been completely rediscovered; furthermore, neo-Confucianism, dominant since the Song and Ming dynasties, had grossly distorted the essence of Confucianism. The writings of the missionaries were to reveal the true nature of Confucianism and to supplement what it had lost. Additionally, in the philosophy of Confucianism, the Jesuits argued, there lacked a sense of transcendentalism due to its overwhelming concern over worldly affairs, and it was time to augment and strengthen the spiritual aspect.

Excluding Buddhism

As for “excluding Buddhism,” the missionaries, realizing the declining position of Buddhism in the Chinese society, squarely addressed the conflict and incommensurability between Christianity and Buddhism. Again, the missionaries knew that Confucianism, often

labeled as a religion, was in fact a moral philosophy that guided behaviors of the Chinese people. Its quality as a religion, strictly speaking, was not quite clear. Instead, Buddhism was truly a religion and its religious doctrines posed a threat to Christianity. Aware of the strained relationship between Confucianism and Buddhism, missionaries aligned themselves with the former while debasing the latter: “[The sage] emperors such as Xun, Yao, Zhou, and Kong can all follow the god in their practical affairs; that is good. Buddhist believers defy and degrade the god and want to surpass the god; that is no good” (quoted in Fang, p. 208).

It is necessary to point out that there was a rhetorical dimension in this strategy. The Chinese literati has the conviction that a decent man with impeccable ethos will persuade his audience with the power of words, while a barbarian yields to force to achieve his goals. Avoidance of confrontation and force was one of Confucianism’s basic principles. Communicating with the Chinese through their words and their writings, the missionaries demonstrated a responsiveness to and connectedness with the psychology of their Chinese audience. Additionally, since conversing and sharing their writings with the members of Chinese literati was a well respected, indigenous cultural performance, the Jesuits thus identified themselves with Chinese cultural behaviors and in return, the Chinese audience identified with them.

Cross-Cultural Communication: A Critique

It is indisputable that the Western missionaries were mainly concerned with religious matters and were mostly engaged in religious activities, but their presence in China, as is shown throughout this study, was of great cultural significance, beyond the narrow confinement of religion. For instance, the missionaries in China during this period also began a two-way cultural communication – introducing Chinese culture to the West on the one hand and bringing Western culture to China on the other, which marked this period a true starting point of Chinese culture’s meeting with the West. Matteo Ricci initiated a movement of “Introducing the Eastern Learning to the West” (*Dongxue Xijian*), which was continued by Jean Grueber (1623-1680), Moyriac de Mailla (1669-1748), Antoine Gaubil (1689-1759), Joseph de Premare (1666-1735), and others. This movement facilitated a Western understanding of China and a Chinese cultural impact on the Western philosophy as well as on Western culture.

Likewise, in “Introducing the Western Learning to the East” (*Xixue Dongjian*), the missionaries had remarkable achievements. What appeared under the rubric of the “Western Learning” were translations of various academic fields such as from astronomy, mathematics,

physics, biology, philosophy, geography, and phonology. Even though the act of translation remained only a means, motivated for quicker, wider, and more efficient spread of Christianity, the works from the West, nevertheless, exerted a strong influence on the Chinese society and brought a new world view to Guangqi Xu (1562 – 1633), Zhizao Li and other Chinese intellectuals. Moreover, the writings from the West introduced to China a new, pragmatic spirit that served as a corrective to the seemingly “substantial” but in essence “weaseling” style that prevailed in the Chinese writings of that time. From a sociological standpoint, the “Western Learning” signaled the beginning of China’s conscious and long commitment to modernization. This acknowledgement leads to a new agreement of the genesis of China’s modernization efforts: not around the May Fourth Movement, but during the later years of the Ming Dynasty.

There is no denial that their strategies in translations and their practices in the Chinese society were not free from their religious and cultural biases, and it has been extremely debatable in the Christian world whether they should compromise the “true meaning” of God in their dogged efforts to win the hearts of the Chinese. One may argue that the differences between the Christian “Heaven” and the Confucian “tian” were so fundamental and philosophical that any attempt to make them commensurate with each other seemed over-stretched. Just as Gernet (1985) astutely observed: “The classical formulae, ‘respect’ and ‘fear Heaven’, really meant something quite different from the sense given them by Ricci and by many other missionaries after him... These formulae did not refer to a single, all powerful God, the creator of heaven and earth, but instead evoked the ideas of submission to destiny, a religious respect for rituals, and serious and sincere conduct” (Gernet, 1985, p. 193).

But if we free ourselves from the narrow focus on the technicalities of these religious interpretations and transactions, we may find the models the Jesuits had fashioned through their misreading of another culture can at least serve as a starting point for a genuine cross-cultural communication. With the existence of a starting point, dialogues between distinctive cultures and views become possible. As long as individuals from one culture allow themselves to be open to the new world of thoughts and habits, possibilities for positive changes will arise, even defying the original intentions. This appears to have happened to the Jesuits such as Matteo Ricci and his followers who, after immersing themselves in the Chinese society and experiencing its culture and mode of living, made modifications of their own beliefs and spoke for both cultures and traditions. It is not an overstatement to say:

The foundations of that success were laid by the men who, from Ricci to Schall, labored patiently to achieve a synthesis of Chinese and Christian culture, with respect for and understanding of the former and without injury to the latter. That is their merit. For the decline which followed, when the lengthening shadow of the rites controversy darkened the face of the future and forced the Church into a position of seeming hostility to Chinese culture, thereby destroying the possibility of a rapprochement with the Chinese world of letters, they bear no responsibility” (Dunne, 1962, p. 368).

It was unfortunate that the communication strategies oriented toward cultural adaptation fashioned by Ricci and his associates lost its appeal in the West as the Church rejected their efforts and encouraged new approaches (see Fitzgerald, 1965). But the Jesuits and their methods became a source of inspirations to a generation of influential Chinese intellectuals such as Yan Fu who adopted similar communication strategies when promoting the “Western learning,” and who pioneered in the long path toward enlightenment and modernity in China.

In the case of Yan Fu (1854-1921), for example, his translation of Thomas Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics* as a vehicle to teach his fellow Chinese a doctrine of struggle, dynamism, and energy, and to part with the tradition of the Confucian non-contention and the Taoist non-struggle, was guided by a principle of accommodations and adaptations. In the same spirit fashioned by the Jesuits, Yan skillfully defended his choice for translating what was really a very controversial or even pagan book: “The purpose of this book of Huxley’s is to correct the abuses of Spencer’s laissez-faire. Many of its arguments are in accord with what our ancient sages have said” (quoted in Xiao, 1995, p. 86). According to Xiao’s (1995) excellent case study of the translation choices, Yan Fu, like the Jesuits before him, effectively used interrelated tactics by “exploiting the traditional categories,” such as *tao* (Way), *ren* (love) and *tian* (Heaven), to facilitate understanding of the Darwinian idea of the struggle for existence, and by “introducing a moral universe into Huxley’s amoral vision” to adapt to the needs of his audience (Xiao, 1995, pp. 87-88).

While understandings and motivations behind the communication transactions between cultures are diametrically different today as compared to those of the Jesuits under study – presently, a more genuine push toward tolerating and celebrating the differences seems to be in order – the methods developed and in some cases perfected by the Jesuits, however, find their imprints in many disciplines such as comparative literature, culture studies, and communication studies.

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