



When the Chinese Met Jesus

ABSTRACT

Various missionary efforts brought Christianity into China. This paper focuses on the historical and social forces at the “point of contact” through the Jesuits, particularly that of Matteo Ricci in 1582. It outlines the style of delivery of the central Christian message and the perceptions of the various missiological constants at that time. The paper also seeks to describe the encounter between the Chinese and Christianity within China’s cultural, anthropological, social and philosophical context. Based on these considerations, it explores the Christologies of the Chinese people and missionary approaches appropriate for today.

INTRODUCTION

Various missionary efforts brought Christianity into China. This paper focuses on the historical and social forces at the “point of contact” through the Jesuits, particularly that of Matteo Ricci in 1582.¹ By then China had been unified under the rule of the Qin dynasty (~221BCE), an absolute monarchy (君主专制社会) that lasted for more than 2,000 years. With its distinct executive style and core

¹Various sources documented missionary efforts in China starting in the 3rd century. Most of these efforts were seen as sporadic, with localized and limited results. Jeroom Heyndrickx, “The Fifth Encounter between Christianity and China.” US Catholic China Bureau Website, 2009. ngs.com/articldndD.



values, the rule of absolute monarchy not only shaped the social life and psychology of the Chinese, but also sustained China in the face of opposing forces. Although agricultural land was distributed, the largely farming populace was beset with anxiety and hardship brought about by natural calamities. Their woes were compounded by corruption and oppression by a dominant state and empire.

Dominating the philosophical and moral system of the 16th century was the school of Ru (Confucianism), which promoted proper relations within society and country as a way to progress. Individuals were to know their place in all situations, cultivate themselves, and grow in personal morality in the balance of politics and religion. Ru's notion of harmony between Heaven and Human denotes a deep sense of the holistic relationship between humankind and the transcendent. Everyone was to strive to become a sage (君子/圣人), a person who had reached enlightenment following the principles of love (仁); righteousness (义); proper conduct (礼); wisdom (智); and, courage (勇). The ideas permeated industrial technical, domestic technical, symbolic culture, and most important, the world view of the Chinese.

THE CHRISTIAN OFFER

Taking Matteo Ricci as the point of contact between Catholicism and the Chinese, a description of the style of delivery of the central Christian message and the perceptions of the various missiological constants at that time are presented in Table 1.²

A proper approach was needed to overcome social and cultural barriers in the introduction of the person of Jesus. Table 2 below summarizes the Chinese situation and the Christian offer.

Jesus would have to be presented in ways understandable to the Chinese. First, he could be cast as a Western teacher, who could—as the Chinese became familiar with his teachings—be shown to be as great as Buddha, Confucius, and Lao Tze. He might be depicted as a deity similar to well-known Chinese deities, such as the Goddess of Mercy,

²To understand the missiological constants better, see Stephens Bevans and Roger Schoeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2004).

Table 1. Mission style and mission constants during the 16th century.

Mission Style	
Stream of Christianity	Roman Catholic Accommodational
Primary model	Accommodational
Theological typology	B (Emphasis on truth)
Mission Constants	
Christology	High
Ecclesiology	Mystical communion (sacrament)
Eschatology	Realized (individual)
Salvation	Spiritual
Anthropology	Positive
Culture	Positive (translation model)

Table 2. The Chinese situation and the Christian offer.

Chinese	Jesus
Situation that requires attention	(Jesology)
Economic hardship	The person of Jesus and the Humanity of Jesus
Oppression / injustice	(Jesus's life story and his relationship with people)
General desires	Teachings
Social	The way of life of a Christian
Well-being for self and family	To exercise the reign of God on earth
Liberation from unjust treatment	(Christology)
Upliftment of life conditions and social standing	The fullness of Jesus, divinity beyond humanity
Fairness, equality in life	The eschatological Kingdom of God
Justice and honor	
Religious / Psychological	Teachings
The striving for sage-hood	Redemption / salvation
The search for those who could guide one to achieve sage-hood	The ultimate union with God

the Bodhisattvas or Tua Pek Kong (the Great Ancestor).³ As a cosmic deity, Jesus could be portrayed as a way to achieve enlightenment, protection, and healing. Although falling short of a full understanding of Jesus as God, this approach is useful.

Jesus could eventually be accepted and revered as the sole and sovereign God who came down to save us from our sins. This view would best appeal to those seeking teachings about release and a top-down delivery from a bleak oppressive reality. Steeped in the Confucian tradition, however, the Chinese would have perceived as disrespectful any attempt to cross the line between humans and a Sovereign God. Such an outlook falls short of the personal relationship to which God invites humans.

Probably a most integrated Christology for the Chinese is that of Jesus as a Liang-You (良友), the wise, good, and fraternal friend who accompanies and helps in the life journey toward sage-hood. Such a view would have not only assumed the divinity of Jesus, but it would have also broken down the strict top-down relationship between master and follower. Having established the desired personal encounter and relationship, the Chinese would then be more comfortable about coming to Jesus with their joys and sorrows, turning to him as a personal friend who aids and guides, and at the same time, as God whose teachings and doctrines would be the means to achieve personal and eschatological salvation.

RICCI'S APPROACH

Instead of plunging right in and proclaiming the Gospel when he arrived in 1582, Ricci started by painstakingly trying to understand the context of the people. He endeavored to introduce Christianity to China delicately, choosing to graft the faith organically onto China's existing culture rather than Christianizing it by first Westernizing the Middle Kingdom's ancient traditions.⁴ He also saw that China's history

³Kang San Tan, "The Problem of an Alien Jesus for Asian Christianity with Special Reference to Chinese Buddhists." *Encounters Mission Ezine* 16 (2007): 3.

⁴Anthony E. Clark, "Weaving a Profound Dialogue between West and East: On Matteo Ricci, S.J." *Ignatius Insight* 27 (May 2009).

and culture stood as a monument to the truth of One God, and that reason would lead to the concept of the Creator.⁵

In order to understand the people and to dialogue with them through reason, Ricci mastered the native language and the Confucian classics. Steadily and systematically, he connected with the intellectuals, enticing them with his knowledge, and through the exchange, aroused in them an interest in God and Catholicism. He intrigued the Chinese with Western materials, charming them with Western maps; inventions, such as clocks; and musical instruments, such as clavichords.

Crucial to Ricci's approach was the explanation that Christianity was latent in Chinese culture. He introduced the word "God" (天主), literally "heaven-Lord," which draws from the Chinese belief that "there is a divine three feet above the head, and there is a divine three feet below the ground" (举头三尺有神灵, 地下三尺有主行). By merely introducing the term "God" in Chinese, he thus convinced the people that the God of Catholicism is the same God known to the Chinese.

Similarly important was the role played by "the three great pillars of Chinese Catholicism," Paul Xu Guangqi, Li Zhizao, and Yang Tingyun, three Chinese statesmen and converts who advanced the religion in the Imperial Court. Although Ricci himself died without meeting the emperor, his successors managed to establish themselves as official court astronomers and headed the government engineering bureaus. A son of Kang Xi, the first Emperor of the Qing Dynasty, was placed under the tutelage of a Jesuit priest and scientist. So favorable was the emperor's relationship with the Catholic scholars that in 1692, he issued an edict granting all Christians the right to teach, preach, and convert people throughout the empire. This heralded the Golden Period of Catholicism in China.⁶

⁵Michael Billington. "Matteo Ricci, the Grand Design, and the Disaster of the 'Rites Controversy.'" *Executive Intelligence Review* (9 November 2001): 2.

⁶Ibid.

Unfortunately, Ricci's goal of "universal conversion of the whole kingdom" was not achieved. Horrified by the Jesuit accommodation of Chinese customs and rituals, the Dominican, Franciscan, and Augustinian orders that arrived in the 17th century, brought their heated objections to Rome, in what is now known as the "Rites Controversy." They raised three main concerns:

- The use of various terms for God: for example, "天 Tian" (Heaven) or "上帝 Shangdi" (Lord of Above / Supreme Emperor);
- Christian participation in the season rites for Confucius; and
- Christians' use of tablets with the forbidden inscription "site of the soul," and involvement in Chinese rites for ancestor worship.

This sparked a protracted theological battle among the religious orders in China, dragging into the conflict Pope Clement XI and the Chinese Emperor Kang Xi. Pope Clement XI declared most of the Chinese rites to be "non-Christian," which greatly enraged the Emperor, who subsequently declared in 1721 a total ban on western missionaries and preaching in China.⁷ The decree lasted till the 20th century, crushing all hopes for the large-scale Christianization of the Chinese.

INSIGHTS

Ricci was a visionary who in the 16th century used missiological strategies promulgated 400 years later starting with Vatican Council II. Five characteristics of his approach are discussed below.

1. Slow and steady will do it.

James Duncan, SJ, in analyzing the Rites Controversy, stated: "There is a necessity of proceeding in mission slowly and prudently. We cannot welcome and take on board everything, or can everything

⁷Dan J. Li, trans. *China in Transition, 1517-1911* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1969), 22.

that is acceptable be integrated and implemented at once. Change, particularly in respect to rituals, ceremonies, customs and convictions, needs to be gradual.”⁸

The ‘incarnation’ of the faith into a new tradition and culture takes time, but it is a necessary and crucial step. Evidence of the success of Ricci’s approach is still apparent in the strong and growing Catholic community in Hebei Province (a direct result of the initial missionary efforts of Ricci), despite all historical adversities.⁹

2. Don’t force it down people’s throats.

It was unfortunate that the Church’s confrontational stance soured the Chinese welcome of Catholicism.¹⁰ Rather than seeking to understand the Chinese rites, the newly arrived missionaries insisted on transplanting the “western pot” of traditional Western theology into the hands of new converts.¹¹ The resulting resentment towards Christianity as a whole spiraled into the Chinese associating Christianity with Western aggression and rejecting the essence of Catholic faith. Consequently, conversions or even simple encounters with the person of Jesus were forbidden for many generations.

3. Dialogue.

Dialogue entails the understanding of the context of the people, their life situation, history, culture, and philosophy. It calls for missionaries to take off their shoes and put on those of the people they are trying to understand. Ricci did that by learning the local language and mastering Chinese philosophical teachings. Sadly, his efforts were later overthrown by missionaries more interested in control and speedy conversion. Many later studies on the “Rites Controversy”

⁸James Duncan, “The Chinese Rites Controversy: A Clash of Culture,” *Centro Pro Unione*. (Rome: American Theological Library Association, 2009), 24.

⁹Interview with Fr. Zhang Shao Feng, diocesan priest in Hebei Province, China, 9 September 2009.

¹⁰Jerome Heyndrickx, “The Fifth Encounter between Christianity and China.”

¹¹Enoch Wan, “Christianity in the Eye of Traditional Chinese.” *Missiology.org* (July 1999).

show that dialogue with the people, the existing church in China, and the political government would have been the most crucial element towards its resolution.¹²

4. Do inculturation.

Ultimately, missionaries succeed if they introduce the Christian faith in a way that makes sense to others. Rather than using today's emphasis on the encounter with the person of Jesus (Jesulogy), Ricci proceeded from his understanding of the Chinese: their deep roots in Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism; their profound respect for heavenly gods; and their top-down relationship with deities. He introduced "God" (天主) as being the same as the God they were familiar with. As the Chinese gradually accepted the Catholic notion of God, he led them to Jesus and other doctrines, constantly drawing links and similarities with Chinese customs and thought.

No doubt, a balance must be struck when inculturating the faith into another tradition and screening what is to be preserved and assimilated while what is undesirable needs to be pointed out. Without inculturation, however, missionary efforts are likely to fail or have tragic consequences.

5. Leave politics at the door.

When success is gauged by territorial coverage, missionaries are likely to compete as seen in the Rites Controversy. Such a hard-headed approach, which rejected dialogue and understanding, resulted in a lose-lose situation. Internal politics destroyed a great part of the Catholic mission. Errors need to be admitted, and lessons drawn.

¹²Jerome Heyndrickx, "The Fifth Encounter between Christianity and China." Also Kang San Tan, "The Problem of an Alien Jesus for Asian Christianity."

CHINA TODAY

The vast transformation of Chinese life and outlook over the past five centuries has major implications on mission today.

1. Politics

Successive assaults by modern Western ideas and communist ideology since the Communist Party took full control of the country in 1949 have eroded the old imperial ideology, Confucian civic morality, and Buddhist-Taoist religious belief. The communist model under the Chinese socialism of Deng Xiao Ping, however, eventually collapsed, creating a spiritual vacuum marked by a crisis of trust, high levels of corruption, and social dysfunction.

Recognizing the vacuum, the government has reconsidered Christianity for its modern outlook and potential to unify the populace.¹³ Although open mission continues to be prohibited in China, the government now sees Christianity as an import no different from the socialist ideology brought into the country two generations earlier. Catholicism is said to be favored over Protestantism as it is seen to be more institutionally organized and therefore can be better controlled and utilized as a unifying force.¹⁴ Regardless of the reason behind the welcome, it is an opportune time to introduce Jesus anew to the Chinese, not for them to be controlled but liberated.

2. Economy

After 30 years of reform, China has become the world's third biggest economy and third largest exporter. The poverty rate fell from 53 percent in 1981 to 12.5 percent in 2005. Phenomenal growth, however, is accompanied by extremely skewed income inequality between the more highly developed coastal provinces and the less developed inland region, where around 130 million subsist on less than U\$1 a day. About 35 percent of the Chinese population lives under U\$2 a day. Eighty percent of the wealth is in the hands of 20 percent of its population. New social rifts are widening.

¹³Francesco Sisci, "China's Catholic Moment." *First Things* (June/July, 2009): 2.

¹⁴Ibid.

3. Social situation

The Chinese population has more than doubled in 50 years, reaching a staggering 1.3 billion. To slow the growth, the government enforced a one-child policy in 1979, resulting in a unique generation of pampered Chinese youth, now called the “little emperors.” This youth culture is marked by serious problems with authority figures, disillusionment, lack of drive, problems in group collaboration, and poor self-awareness. The one-child policy also generated social problems, including gender-based birth-rate disparity, an increase in the number of abandoned or orphaned children, and infanticide. A large “cyber-generation” made up of about 340 million internet users, most of them “little emperors,” socialize and are shaped in this virtual realm.

4. Worldview

The current Chinese are strongly influenced by “Chinese-style socialism,” which puts great emphasis on economic gain. Moral values are shaped by cyber-culture, especially that of the West. The government has had to call citizens to task for certain forms of “uncivilized behavior,” noting “seven cardinal sins and three vulgar habits of Chinese travellers.”

5. The Catholic population

The Chinese Christian population is estimated to be between a few million and 130 million, with Catholics growing since 1949 by about 110 percent and non-Catholics by about 350 percent.¹⁵ Catholics are split between those aligned with the State-approved Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and those belonging to the banned “underground church,” which remains loyal to the Holy See. As the Chinese government demands that all Chinese “Catholics” be loyal to the State, those faithful to the Vatican face great persecution.

¹⁵Ibid. Also John Shijiang Zhang. “Who is Christ and What is the Church for the Chinese People and Society?” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 44, no. 3 (2007).

Recent attempts at rapprochement between the Vatican and the Chinese government have fallen through over who can appoint the bishops of the Church. Missionaries need to understand this complex situation to function well and cater to the people of faith in China.

THE SECOND ENCOUNTER

Initiatives to proclaim Christ to the Chinese today would need to consider the aforementioned context as well as the lessons from the past.

1. Listen first.

A missionary needs full immersion in China for months, if not years, and total openness to people and their cultural differences. When that is done, the missionary is ready to dialogue.

2. 这是耶稣 Jesus, as the Chinese would know him

Recognizing that it is through one's context that one can fully appreciate the person of Jesus, today's missionaries are encouraged to educate the people to accept the good in their culture.¹⁶ Missionaries could then present Jesus within this positive cultural context.

With materialism, modernization, and globalization engulfing China, it is likely that many have become strangers to their own cultural past and identity.¹⁷ Instead of judging the other as culturally alienated, however, it would be better to start introducing Jesus in the context of their culture as it is. Other Chinese cultural realities to be considered are cyber-culture, communism, and social policies.

3. We will always be strangers.

Although missionaries might be able to develop an emic (insider) perspective through time and immersion, they will not be able to think and function totally as a local.¹⁸ Constantly, they need to

¹⁶Kang San Tan, "The Problem of an Alien Jesus for Asian Christianity?"

¹⁷Jacob Thekanath, "The Asian Image of Jesus: Theological, Biblical, Catechetical & Liturgical Renewal", *FABC Paper* No 92q. (2000).

¹⁸Kang San Tan, "The Problem of an Alien Jesus for Asian Christianity?"

be aware of their own cultural heritage, mannerisms, and prejudices. It is therefore important for missionaries to work with locals, shifting from being “producers” to “facilitators” of the understanding of Jesus and His message. The way the Chinese could feel it in their “bones is one powerful way!”¹⁹

4. Correct the misunderstandings.

Missionaries in China need to be able to correct misconceptions about Jesus that originate from the history of mission and other sources. These include notions of Jesus as a Westerner (cultural), Christianity as imposed (history), and Jesus as a prophet in the *Qur'an* (teachings of other religions). They can start by dealing with cultural misunderstandings from one culture; and then with those associated with the other. They should be able to break down prejudice, enable dialogue, and show respect for the other's culture and tradition totally.

5. Play the game.

Despite strict government controls and regulations, religions do survive. In the face of trials, they grow resilient and deeply rooted. To make best use of opportunities, missionaries need to fully understand the implications of regulations and analyze the motives behind their recent relaxation. It is best that missionaries deal tactfully with bureaucrats and civil authorities; this facilitates evangelization and mission programs. It is also ideal if they can navigate the complexities in the split between the underground and patriotic church. While some favor rapprochement, others believe that it is just wishful thinking and support only one side of the church. No doubt, the issue will persist.

How then can missionaries effectively work under such conditions? The fundamental principles apply: first, understand the situation and be ever so sensitive while dealing with them. Second, grab all opportunities to dialogue with the people and introduce Jesus to them in a way that makes sense to them. Stick to your conviction to share this special encounter with the person of Jesus.

¹⁹Fareed Zakaria, “The Power of Personality.” *Newsweek* (December 24, 2007).

6. A local Jesus

The task of understanding the context, honestly dialoguing with the locals, and introducing the person of Jesus is meant to result in the formulation of a local Christology. It is a two-way process in which the missionary helps the other come to terms with their own relationship with Jesus and to find their own expression of who this Jesus is. In doing so, missionaries fulfil the contemporary missionary thrust of bringing Jesus to the people through dialogue and the offer of tools in theologizing. As the Chinese come to a relationship with Jesus, they learn how to formulate their Christology. This way, they come to understand the importance and meaning of the process, and in the future, themselves become missionaries who help others create their own Christology.

Missionaries might then proceed by helping construct a Sino-Theology: a unique theological orientation specifically designed for the Chinese people in contra-distinction to traditional Western theology, employing the Chinese cognitive pattern, mode of social interaction, and social themes.²⁰ The Chinese could then claim their theology and express their faith through their culture and lifeways. When the Chinese can see Jesus, accept the message of God through their own paradigm, and also theologize through their context and mindset, the missionaries will be able to be truly jubilant.

CONCLUSION

The mission history of China has provided great lessons on the attitudes and methods of spreading the word of God within China's unique social situation and philosophical outlook. Mission in China today remains complex, and missionaries are cautioned against attempts to preach and evangelize without the benefit of dialogue and a proper understanding of the context. With a firm grasp of the lessons from the past, missionaries together with the Chinese faithful could hope for the formation of a distinctive Chinese Christology.

²⁰ Enoch Wan, "Practical Contextualization: A Case Study of Evangelizing Contemporary Chinese," *Missiology.org* (March 2000): 1.

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