FOCUS

Displacing Jesuit Science in Qing China

Introduction

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‘East meets West’ or ‘China meets Europe’: such formulations have long been used in titles of books, lectures and exhibitions concerning the Jesuit mission in Ming-Qing China.¹ These are convenient catchphrases, and the historical sentiment they often express—that the Jesuits went beyond the ‘Self’ and engaged in dialogue with the ‘Other’—retains all its relevance today.² But it is also important to be aware of the assumptions that underpin this framework and to reflect on the limitations it represents. Much has been written with the assumption that ‘China’ and ‘Europe’ can be construed as civilizations, mentalities, or cultural traditions that have clear-cut boundaries and definable core features; that they developed in mutual ignorance until the Jesuits brought them into ‘encounter’ or ‘confrontation’; and that the history of that event illustrates the features that China and Europe are assumed to possess. This historiographical approach can be productive, but it can also lead to the essentialization of China and Europe, writing out the inner complexity of both entities and obliterating historical factors that cannot be easily categorized as pertaining to the one or the other. It can also lead to the misconception that ‘China’ and ‘Europe’ are coterminous with ‘East’ and ‘West’, thus eliding the existence of other civilizations between them. The three articles gathered in this *Focus of East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* constitute a coordinated attempt to address these issues through a deliberate displacement of our narrative foci.

We use the word ‘displacement’ here primarily in its geographical and spatial meaning. For two decades, historians of Christianity have thoroughly changed the way we think about the Jesuit mission and the

¹ Reichwein (1925); Gernet (1982); Ronan and Oh (1988); Mungello (1999); Deiwiiks, Führer and Geulen (2014), to name but a few.

² For instance, Reichwein calls for young Europeans to be ‘educated by ancient China’ (Reichwein 1925, 3), and Ronan speaks of sixteenth century Jesuits as models of respectful inter-cultural dialogue worthy of emulation today.

Chinese response to their proselytization by adopting a local or regional, rather than civilizational, scale of analysis. On the one hand, scholars have drawn attention to the diversity of religious cultures that missionaries from various parts of Europe brought with them—showing for instance that the outlook of Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), the first Jesuit to reach Beijing, was not merely that of a Westerner, but of “an Italian, submitted to the Portuguese Empire, obedient to the General in Rome, having lived for a longer time in China than in any other part of the world.”³ On the other hand, scholars have also offered dense descriptions of the social fabric of the particular places in China where Christianity did gain a footing, most importantly Shanxi and Fujian.⁴ The acceptance or rejection of Christianity no longer maps onto the perennial features of two great civilizations. It is now seen as the contingent result of interaction between specific groups of people at a given time and place, illustrating the working of lineage structures, trading networks and local religions. The story of Christianity in China is thus no longer one of mere success or failure, but a cluster of different stories taking place in widely different local situations.

These developments in the history of Christianity in China were made possible in part by the rise of regional approaches in the study of late imperial China since the 1980s.⁵ In some ways, the more recent flourishing of scholarship that explores the history of the Qing as a multi-ethnic and multilingual empire extends the concern with territoriality, diversity and contingency. Historians now recognize the fact that the Qing ruled over a territory three times larger than Ming China and incorporated a mosaic of non-Han peoples. From there, many have demonstrated the extent to which the process of Qing state-building varied in space by showing that the emperor took on different faces and adopted different discourses while facing the various peoples in the imperial dominion—the Manchu, the Chinese, the Mongols, and not least, the Europeans at court.⁶ Historians of science and historians of art have recently started to draw on these insights and to reevaluate the Jesuit knowledge in the Qing court as dependent upon a particular politics of learning, radically different from the logic that had governed Jesuit knowledge in China during the late Ming period.⁷ Our contributions build on these insights as we tell stories that unfold in and around Qing imperial space and seek to illuminate its very configuration.

³ Standaert (2002), p. 23.

⁴ Zhang (2009); Menegon (2009); Harrison (2013). See also Standaert (1997) and Standaert (2001), pp. 380ff for a summary of these trends, which were already under way in the 1990s.

⁵ For a summary, see Naquin and Rawski (1987), p. 138ff.

⁶ See Waley-Cohen (2004) and Rowe (2012) for a summary.

⁷ Puente-Ballesteros (2011); Jami (2012); Kleutghen (2015); Ten Doesschate-Chu and Ding (2015).

In European history, too, historians have focused on spatial dynamics to challenge the unity of categories such as ‘modern science’ or ‘the Enlightenment’ that were previously defined as disembodied sets of beliefs which people either accepted or opposed. The tendency to ignore internal diversity is all the more salient in the history of the Jesuits, who have long been regarded as a homogeneous and disciplined body of men implementing a corporate policy dictated by Rome.⁸ To remedy these methodological problems, attempts have been made to situate intellectual movements in princely courts, learned academies, and printing shops, and to trace the circulation of ideas as embodied by people, books and instruments. By asking, for example, “Where was the Enlightenment” instead of “What was the Enlightenment”, historians are gaining a more complex view of the Enlightenment as a series of loosely connected local, regional, national and global movements, taking place through a plurality of interlocking agendas and chronologies.⁹ Some scholars have also striven to ‘relocate’ the emergence of modern science outside Europe—in trading ports and colonies, on the high seas and along the roads of expeditions.¹⁰ Questions about the spatial dynamics of knowledge have also been raised in the history of East Asian science, leading to further reassessment of European inputs.¹¹ These converging developments are changing the way we think about cross-cultural contacts, which now appear as disparate and localized events, the outcomes of which can be understood not only in relation to the great intellectual traditions, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to the messy reality at specific moments and places.

The three articles that follow focus on specific spatial and temporal locations of the Jesuit missionaries’ activities in China to show how new knowledge was produced. Mario Cams examines land surveying activities on the Qing empire’s Mongolian frontier by mixed teams of Jesuit missionaries and Qing officials in the 1690s and the subsequent redefinition of the standard *chi* 尺 in 1702. He argues that together they created a ‘hybrid’ or ‘new’ cartographic practice at the Qing court, later implemented during the comprehensive surveys for the imperial atlas known as *Huangyu quanlantu* 皇輿全覽圖 (printed 1717-1721). Wu Huiyi analyzes references from China Jesuits’ writings that allude to their knowledge about other parts of the world beyond Europe, including India, the Americas and the Middle East, and traces their itineraries through those regions. She shows how knowledge and experience from elsewhere shaped the China Jesuits’ scholarship on natural history, medicine and geography

⁸ For a summary critique of this approach, see Romano (2011).

⁹ Livingston (2003); Withers (2007); Jacob (2007).

¹⁰ The expression is from Raj (2007). See also Bourguet, Licoppe and Sibum (2002); Schaffer *et al.* (2009).

¹¹ Jami (2013); Eggert, Siegmund and Würthner (2014).

between 1680 and 1750. Alexander Statman tells the story of a friendship between the missionary Joseph-Marie Amiot (1718-1793) and the Manchu prince Hongwu 弘晔 (1743-1811) from the 1770s to the 1790s and uncovers their conversations about the latest discoveries and inventions such as electricity and gas balloons. Statman thus presents an exceptional case that challenges the received narrative of the general demise of interpersonal scientific collaboration in Beijing during the decades following the suppression of the Society of Jesus.

In each case, 'China' and 'Europe' do not appear as disembodied abstractions nor as cultural monoliths, and our reflections do not start from a presupposed divide between them. This is not to deny the convenience of such terms, nor the real differences between intellectual traditions. In fact, Qing surveys of the Mongolian frontier revealed incompatibilities between the techniques used by the missionaries and those of state officials, and European science appealed to Manchu noblemen in part because it was advertised as a foreign curiosity. But in all the cases we examine, distinctions between China and Europe enter the picture as they were perceived by historical actors. From their points of view, the divide was gradual and variegated. Wu argues that because eighteenth century missionaries did not fly into China directly from Europe, so to speak, but had to travel mile after mile over lands and seas, they thought about China through a wide spectrum of equally foreign realities. We also find that those involved in exchange often saw cultural differences as fluid and fleeting, as for example when they integrated mapping techniques, or historically contingent, as in the idea that Western and Chinese science shared a common ancient origin. Eighteenth-century knowledge resists simple categories such as 'Chinese' and 'European'; neither content nor context was routinely categorized in this way, and neither of the concepts had yet been formulated in the sense that historians use them today.

Rejecting the divide between China and Europe in civilizational terms helps us to perceive often overlooked locations and actors that do not naturally fit into that dichotomy. Our attention is often drawn to the seemingly peripheral places, including the Mongolian frontier, the Caspian Sea and the 'Indies' where missionaries dwelt before they arrived in China, or the private mansion of a minor Manchu prince such as Hongwu. With such spatial displacement, our stories also highlight the role played by people who were neither 'Chinese' nor 'European' strictly speaking. All three contributions consider the Manchu elite, who enter our pictures as proactive patrons enlisting Jesuits' expertise in the service of Qing imperial learning, as cultured private persons whose princely stature ensured the privilege to pursue Western learning for curiosity, or as idle consumers of Western luxury goods. Various groups of Mongols also appear, as imperial rivals of the Qing whose defeat by the latter warranted a survey map of the

frontier, or on the contrary as allies and providers of intelligence concerning Central Asia. There were also the Russians, whose strategic position in the middle of the Eurasian landmass turned them into a crucial intermediary between Western Europe and the Qing. Not to mention the Jesuits working in India, in Indochina and in America who, with the Jesuits working in China, formed a correspondence network in which news about the missions was exchanged together with observational data and drugs. We posit that the Jesuits in China produced knowledge not at the intersection between two civilizational blocks, but rather among a plurality of peoples and networks.

Displacing the Jesuits to less familiar locations and times also helps us to cast the well-studied centers in a different light. We indeed find that throughout the eighteenth century, Beijing was a major site of scientific and scholarly exchange, but in ways that varied drastically over time and across different fields of learning. For the cartographic surveys studied by Cams, Beijing was established as an imperial center, the reference point in relation to which the position of each place along the borderland was determined. It was the base from which survey teams set off and to which survey data was brought back afterwards. As seen by Wu, Beijing was the meeting point between two networks, controlled respectively by the Qing court and by the Society of Jesus, both channeling books, correspondence and informers. It was therefore in Beijing that knowledge written in Chinese, Manchu and Western European languages about the Eurasian heartland was productively compared and crosschecked. Statman offers a detailed map of social contact in Beijing anchored around the famous French Jesuit church, the Beitang 北堂, and the private mansion of a Manchu prince. Outside its normal settings in the Astronomical Bureau (Qintian jian 欽天監) or the imperial summer palaces, missionary science in China was of a strikingly different nature and operated according to a different logic.

While we hope to introduce greater complexity and shed new lights on the familiar story of circulation, we are also cautious not to take circulation as the default state of affairs. We found in our investigations that the circulation of people, objects and intelligence was neither smooth nor self-evident—people, objects and intelligence do not circulate unless deliberately made to. Wu's contribution shows that the difficult conditions of eighteenth-century travel shaped missionaries' perspectives, from which they later judged the worth of newly obtained information and decided whether to transmit it. Cams's and Statman's articles reveal, in a sense, examples of opposing but coexisting approaches to Western science in Qing China: on the one hand, cartographic techniques were integrated into imperial standard practice and later implemented in the largest land surveys in world history up to that time; on the other hand, later developments in electricity and air-balloon technology left little legacy, and

no documentary trace at all in Chinese sources. In both cases, however, the circulation or non-circulation depended on the deliberate choices of the actors involved to explore newly available knowledge, to reject it, to (partially) appropriate it, or to keep it secret.

We also suggest that, to a large extent, the circulation or non-circulation of knowledge can be pinned down to the spatial scale on which people, objects and information moved. Cams tells a story that primarily unfolds on a regional scale, back and forth between Beijing and the Mongol frontier; but that distance is also measured on a day-to-day basis, during which the Jesuits, the Qing officials, and the emperor constantly interacted, and discrepancies between practices could be made apparent and later subsumed. In Statman's contribution, the two main protagonists, the ex-Jesuit Amiot and the Manchu prince Hongwu, lived only two kilometers apart in the same city, which was propitious for the development of their friendship and their sustained intellectual exchange. Yet Amiot was also dependent upon his correspondence with the French minister Henri Bertin (1720-1792) for the supply of scientific news and instruments: this correspondence, on the contrary, was transcontinental, taking place at yearly intervals that sufficed for interest in certain subjects to wax and wane. And a central concern in Wu's paper is to make sense of that transcontinental scale of circulation by bringing out the perils and possibilities it represented for the individual travelers. Cross-cultural circulation of knowledge in history, we claim, was by no means the result of candid openness or straightforward curiosity towards an abstract Other.

Our *Focus* in this issue of *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* is itself a testament to this claim. When the three articles that follow were submitted, their authors were based respectively in Macao, California, and Cambridge, almost evenly distributed over the Earth's time zones. The project took shape over a very short three days of face-to-face contact during the 14th International Conference on the History of Science in East Asia in Paris in July 2015, and more than one year of periodically sustained emails, text messages and video calls. From the beginning, we experienced the limitations imposed by long-distance communication, and toward the end we became aware also of those that result from our respective intellectual backgrounds. We have not freed ourselves from the constraints of our perspectives, but perhaps we have become more aware of them, hopefully paving the way for novel investigations.

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