Book Reviews

Ines G. Županov and Pierre Antoine Fabre, eds.,


Few topics have captured the attention of scholars interested in the long and sometimes truculent history of Sino-Western relations more than the rites controversy that shattered those relations during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Studies of this transcultural exchange and conflict were inaugurated with Francis Rouleau’s exceptional, but concise, 1967 essay in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Francis A. Rouleau, “Chinese Rites Controversy,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* [New York: MacGraw Hill, 1967], 3:610–17). George Minamiki’s pro-rites book, *The Chinese Rites Controversy* (George Minamiki, *The Rites Controversy: From Its Beginning to Modern Times* [Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985]), followed closely behind in 1985, which was in turn challenged by the somewhat anti-rites book in support of the friars by J. S. Cummins, *A Question of Rite* (J. S. Cummins, *A Question of Rites: Friar Domingo Navarrete and the Jesuits in China* [Aldershot, England: Scholar Press, 1993]). Other works, such as Andrew C. Ross’s *A Vision Betrayed* (Andrew C. Ross, *A Vision Betrayed: The Jesuits in Japan and China, 1542–1742* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994]), have supported the pro-rites Jesuit position in the Chinese rites controversies, though few of these studies have placed the polemics of that era into their larger global context. This collection of essays is a welcome contribution to the study of missionary and indigenous debates regarding non-Christian rites, precisely because this volume widens its purview to include the missionary enterprise beyond China.

While the preponderance of edited volumes struggle to generate cohesion between the disparate chapters, Županov and Fabre have managed to solicit and inspire contributors who have produced a remarkably interrelated collection of chapters. This volume considers Jesuit modes of discernment between non-religious rites that may be styled as purely civil, and those that
are religiously non-Christian. The analytical method through which this discernment is considered is in the book’s commitment to address the issues “of the Malabar and Chinese rites controversies in light of planetary geopolitics and context” (20). The general argument of the essays is that “what used to be studied as local Asian controversies were geographically, chronologically and epistemologically part of a larger process” (20). The curve of the volume is divided into five parts, with two concluding epilogues that consider how the rites controversies of China and India’s Malabar region can function as “cultural resources” that provide new insights into discrete and global cultural histories. Part one includes three essays on the Chinese rites question, each one providing new information and nuances to what has been said in previous studies. Both Ronnie Hsia and Nicolas Standaert, S.J., respond to what has been a long scholarly appeal to hear from indigenous voices who witnessed the tensions and fallout of the rites debates in China. Hsia recounts the opinions of such Chinese participants as Yan Mo 嚴謨, Xia Dacheng 夏大常, and Qiu Sheng 丘晟, all of whom were Christians who anticipated the consequences that befell Christianity after the rites were prescribed. Among the distinctions of this chapter is its analysis of how local Chinese literati, such as Leontius Li, quote the Chinese classics to illustrate that the friars who also quote those classics have misinterpreted and misquoted these works in order to propagate their anti-rites position. Chief among the terms that engendered misunderstanding was ji 祭, or “sacrifice,” a character which most Jesuits viewed as purely civil, while their opponents (Dominicans, Franciscans, and Missions Etrangères de Paris) understood this to imply a preternatural usurpation of the true Christian sacrifice.

Similarly, Nicolas Standaert excerpts important Chinese voices long veiled in the Roman Jesuit archives in order to underscore the local, national, and transnational nature of the rites debates. Owing to the efforts of the Belgian Jesuit missionary and astronomer in China, Antoine Thomas 安多, who collected the letters of Chinese Christians and forwarded them to Rome, we are able to analyze the rites deliberations as they were expressed by both European missionaries and native intellectuals. As Standaert recalls, these collective Chinese testimonies are “remarkable examples of community actions,” actions that highlight how local Chinese Christians were able to mobilize themselves as “local communities challenged by a common threat” (61). Michela Catto’s essay considers how the term “atheism” was understood by Jesuits to both support the non-religious nature of the Chinese rites, as well as to denigrate them. While Matteo Ricci 利瑪竇 used the apparent “atheistic” nature of the Confucian rites to support the appropriateness of their use by Christians, others
such as Niccolò Longobardo 龍華民, Ricci’s successor, argued that atheism is inherently evil, and thus he urged against the suitability of the rites among Christians in any context.

Parts two, three, and four include chapters on the early modern rites controversies outside of East Asia, mainly focused on the Christian encounter with the indigenous culture of the Malabar region of southwest India. Margherita Trento positions her study on the Jesuit missionary, Roberto de’ Nobili, and how his methods were examined by church authorities to determine whether he had “deviated from Catholic orthodoxy” during his life in southern India (115). Gita Dharampal-Frick, like Trento, considers Nobili’s strategy of accommodation to analyze the rites controversies at Malabar, though she looks more at how this strategy has been viewed as “ritualized dissimulation” (131), and how the implications of India’s rituals were disputed and defined among Western missionaries who were, in the end, enmeshed in the global “upsurge of colonialism” (136). Giuseppe Marcocci and Sabina Pavone place the global rites controversies within the domain of Roman Catholic debates over Christian orthodoxy, looking closely at how local missionaries entered into complex interlocutions with the Roman theologians (inquisitors) at the Holy Office. Among the clear strengths of these chapters is in how their reflections range beyond the ecclesial extent of the Roman Catholic mission, touching upon how Protestant and Orthodox missionaries also played a role in the global disputes regarding the rites. István Perczel and Ovidiu Olar demonstrate how disagreements between missionary communities emerged in social as well as religious areas, though it is evident that these squabbles between denominations typically returned to the issue of how to interpret and regulate the use of indigenous rites. In the case of Eastern Orthodox Christians, Olar demonstrates that theological and liturgical orthodoxy and orthopraxy were abiding concerns, and “the defenders of orthodoxy” were inclined to “castigate innovations and innovators alike” (256).

Part five of the volume includes three essays under the heading of “Idols, Idolatry and Catholic Mission,” though the third contribution by Ana Carolina Hosne deals more with the problems of translation in Peru and China than with concerns of idols and idolatry. Guillermo Wilde confronts the missionary vicissitudes of language mastery, linguistic interpretation and representation in translation and textual production, and, as he puts it, “the disputes between Jesuits and Indians in the administration of spiritual power in which ritual and symbolic devices were appropriated and manipulated” (272). Claudia Brosseder’s chapter provides insights into the effects of the missionary Jesuit presence in the colonial Andes, focusing her analysis on Western interpretations of the
Andean religious system and the “legitimacy and illegitimacy of Andean rituals” (316). Hosne’s chapter is especially significant to the major questions of this volume, as her research adds to our knowledge of how terms figured into the rites controversies of both East Asia and South America. More could be said, I think, about the curious Jesuit assertion that neither Peru nor China had perfectly corresponding terms for the Judeo-Christian God due to the “absence of a letter ‘d’ in both Quechua and Chinese” (338). Surely Ricci was aware that Chinese did, and does, include words that commence with the equivalent sound of “d,” such as dao 道, de 德, ding 丁, and duo 多. The Spanish word Dios and the Latin word Deus could have easily been transcribed phonetically into Chinese characters; why this was not done by Ricci and his confrères would have been an important question to confront in this chapter.

The two concluding epilogues by Pierre Antoine Fabre and Ines G. Županov serve as fitting summaries to this important contribution to the fields of Sino-Western, Sino-missionary, and transnational studies, especially as these areas of research are increasingly concerned with the Jesuit influence upon the history of “planetary geopolitics.” Fabre’s concluding remarks are somewhat pessimistic regarding the actual apprehensibility of what actually happened on the global landscape during the rites controversies, suggesting that the “historiography of the conflict may mislead those who are trying to understand the nature of this quarrel” (345). I am, however, more optimistic about the scholarly enterprise, and I view such welcome publications as this volume as a hopeful promise that with each new layer of analysis we grow more aware of the nuanced contours of transcultural encounter and exchange. This volume is an important contribution to the dialogue between cultures, and between scholars of the past and present. As Cummins has written of the relevance of the rites controversy to our own time: “The problems of that mission were not peculiar to the time or place, then, for it was simply a variant of an ever recurring discussion in the Church: aggiornamento. To that extent the rites controversy continues” (Cummins, Question of Rites, 259).

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