Origins and Development of Catholicism in Macau during the Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties

Catholicism began to spread rapidly in Macau and China in the late sixteenth century, and this progress continued in the century that followed. While the fortunes of Macau city itself ebbed and flowed in the hundred years from its opening in the mid-sixteenth to the late seventeenth century, Catholicism enjoyed what has come to be known as something of a “golden age” in Macau. During this period, Macau served as the principal and most important base for the spread of Catholicism into mainland China; indeed, it can even be said that Catholicism would not exist in China if there was no Macau. However, while the history of Chinese Catholicism has now become a popular subject, the development of Catholicism in Macau has received little attention. This essay, which is based on extensive research of Chinese and Western historical documents, seeks to offer a new, in-depth investigation of the origins and development of Catholicism in Macau during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties.

The Third Entry of Christianity into China and the Establishment of Macau Diocese: 1555–76

The activities of the Jesuit Saint Francis Xavier (1506–52) in Shangchuan Island marked the third entry of Christianity into China. Xavier, the Far East envoy dispatched to India by the superior general Ignatius of Loyola (c.1491–1556), departed Lisbon in 1541 and subsequently reached Goa. In 1549, he traveled to Japan in order to engage in missionary work. However, as it became apparent that Japanese culture was heavily influenced by China, he soon came to the conclusion that Catholicism could be spread more effectively in Japan by propagating Christianity in China. In December 1551, he consequently traveled by ship to Shangchuan Island in Guangdong. From there he went to Malacca, with the aim of asking the Indian governor to send an envoy to the Chinese emperor in order to request authorization for missionary work in China.
mainland China. But this plan ultimately failed. In August 1552, Xavier reached Shangchuan Island, becoming the first Western missionary to enter Guangdong with the aim of propagating Christianity among its inhabitants. At that time, coastal China not only suffered increasingly frequent raids from Japanese pirates but also faced the growing threat of invasion from Portuguese forces, leading the imperial court of the Ming dynasty to strengthen its ban on maritime trade. Without receiving authorization from the Chinese emperor, Xavier was unable to enter mainland China legally. He thus had to devise a covert way to enter mainland China at considerable personal risk. A letter written by Xavier in Shangchuan on October 22, 1552, reads as follows:

Thanks to God’s mercy and sympathy, the large ship of Diogo Pereira [a Portuguese merchant and friend of Xavier] and all passengers safely arrived at Shangchuan port, where we met many boats of other merchants. Shangchuan port is fifteen kilometers away from Guangzhou. Many merchants came here from Guangzhou to do business with the Portuguese. The Portuguese have continuously communicated with them to see whether somebody is willing to bring me into Guangzhou city. All merchants refused and stated that if the governor of Guangdong knows that they are bringing me into the city, their lives and goods would be in great peril. Therefore, no matter how much I offer, they dared not let me enter Guangzhou in their ships.

A merchant from Guangzhou eventually agreed to ship Xavier to Guangzhou city in a small boat in exchange for 200 cruzados. But the merchant did not fulfill his promise. After arriving at Shangchuan Island, therefore, Xavier and his followers immediately set up a church, where they began to carry out religious activities:

After arriving at Shangchuan, we built a church. We celebrated the Mass everyday till I was confined to bed by fever. I was sick for fifteen days. Thanks to God, I have now recovered. I have delayed a lot of holy work, such as making confession, visiting patients, conversing and making friends. I really do not know what I shall write, but we have a very firm

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2 The permit, called “Kanhe,” was issued by the government of the Ming dynasty to foreign ships which came to China to pay tribute to the Chinese emperor.