CHAPTER 15

Restoration or New Creation?

*The Return of the Society of Jesus to China*

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**Introduction**

Although the Society of Jesus is often said to have been “restored” in China in 1842, it was a very different Society which returned and a markedly different China to which it returned. “Return” is a much more appropriate description for what the Jesuits did in China from 1842 to 1949 than “restoration” since their most famous mission, Beijing, was denied them; even their former churches in Jiangnan were “restored” after the Opium War to the Catholic Church rather than the Society of Jesus. And, despite the original intentions of the Holy See and Jesuit superiors, the scientific and intellectual apostolate was only reinstated slowly and then centered on Shanghai rather than the capital as it had been in the old mission. In fact, the new China mission was more a new creation than a restoration, but one suited to an emerging new China.

After the trauma of the suppression of the Jesuits, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, and the divided societies they left, the newly restored Society had to move cautiously. The old Society suffered from and for its triumphalism, partisanship, and political maneuvering, but even had it wished to be assertive—and the mid-nineteenth century Jesuit superior generals were adamant and eloquent in their resistance to such tendencies—their enemies were even better organized and anti-Jesuit propaganda was both virulent and politically effective. Such propaganda also often drew on the enormous literature of the Chinese Rites controversy of over a century before.

The year after the arrival of the first contingent of French Jesuits in Jiangnan, a pasquinade published in Paris accused the Jesuits of promoting idolatry in China, rejecting papal authority in the Chinese Rites controversy, and moral

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1 Strictly speaking, Jiangnan is a geographical term for a large area south (*nan*) of the lower reaches of the Chang Jiang (Long River usually known in the West as the Yangtze). It encompasses parts of several Chinese provinces (mainly Jiangsu and Anhui) and ecclesiastically was the diocese of Nanjing soon to be subdivided. The main cities were Nanjing (the old southern capital), Shanghai, Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Wuxi. To further complicate matters,
laxity.\(^2\) The five massive volumes of the priest-philosopher Vincenzo Gioberti’s *Il gesuita moderno*, which appeared in 1846, used examples from the old China mission to advance a case for a new suppression of the Jesuits.\(^3\)

It is not surprising, then, that the new mission proceeded cautiously and tended to reject rather than appropriate the traditions and practices of the old China mission. The solution to the perennial problem of national rivalries which had contributed to the collapse of the old mission was to create national missions manned by members of one nationality, later even of one Jesuit province. Rome accepted, or rather promoted, the notion of one religious order for each mission; ameliorating the old rivalries, but at the expense of uniformity of practice and a Chinese national consciousness. The vexed question of hierarchy—bishops or vicars apostolic against religious superiors—was superficially resolved by appointing Jesuits as vicars apostolic/bishops (contrary to the Jesuit Institute), but from early in the new mission tensions emerged between Jesuit bishops and mission superiors. Who owned the property, controlled the donations from Europe, and assigned the men to their posts? Where a diocesan seminary was run by the Jesuits, did the seminary belong to the bishop or the Society? Should young trainee Jesuits, European and indigenous study together? Might the seminarians be permitted to join the Society? These were new problems with new solutions that radically changed the ethos of the mission.

Now not only were there other Catholic religious orders, but Protestant missionaries too, especially in the port-city of Shanghai. The remarks in the early mission reports are generally derogatory of the Protestants. Bishop Besi thought that the Protestant Bible translations and tracts could only advance the cause of the true faith.\(^4\) Unlike some of the Protestants, however, and

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1. The area is often called Wu after the ancient pre-unification state in the area; and Wu is the name given to the dialect spoken there.
2. *Épitre aux Jésuites par J.-F. B*** (Paris: Chez tous les marchands de nouveautés, 1843). The poem is accompanied by historical notes which must have undermined the author’s case rather than strengthened it even to someone who knew only the virulent anti-Rites propaganda. The support of idolatry and rejection of papal infallibility re the Chinese Rites question is attributed to a non-existent Jesuit superior of the China mission, “Père Pauquet”; and the unfortunate João Mourão, executed for his friendship with a rival to the throne of the Yongzheng emperor is claimed to have caused the execution by strangulation of 300 missionaries for his debauching the wives of the mandarins. It is, however, an interesting example of anything goes where Jesuits are concerned.
3. *Il Gesuita Moderno*, (Bonamici e Compagni: Losanna, 1846). See especially Tomo 2, Cap. 8. China, he says, is not a special case but a “logical consequence and strict application of the sensual concept” of the Jesuits which instead of preaching an austere philosophical Christianity reduces it to sense experience and excessive devotion.