Jesuit and Protestant Use of Vernacular Chinese in Accommodation Policy

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1 Introduction

A period of 240 years elapsed in the period between Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) entering China and the Protestants’ decision to send their own mission to China. The Protestants eventually arrived in the early nineteenth century, after the Jesuit order had been disbanded and nearly eighty years after the Yongzheng Emperor (r.1722–35) had imposed a ban on Christian missionary work in 1723. During that period, Jesuit missionary work was limited to proselytizing secretly in the coastal cities of China. When the Protestant missionaries arrived, they lived and traveled in the limited area of the Thirteen Factories in Canton and Macau. As a result, the literature often assumes that the Jesuits had little influence on the Protestants’ missionary work. However, as we will see in this chapter, this is not necessarily true. By analyzing Protestant documentation discussing past Catholic missions and their expectations for their mission to China, including William Milne’s (1785–1822) A Retrospect of the First Ten Years of the Protestant Mission to China, this chapter shows that Protestant missionaries, like their Jesuit counterparts, made use of vernacular Chinese and the style of chapter-based novels as part of their efforts to convert the Chinese.¹ By comparing Joseph Prémare’s (1666–1736) Ru Jiao Xin 儒交信 (Discussions between a Confucianist and a believer) with Milne’s Zhang Yuan Liang You Xiang Lun 張遠兩友相論 (Discussion between Zhang and Yuan or two friends), this chapter aims to highlight the similarities between these two generations of missionaries in their use of a policy of accommodation: scholarly friendship and the use of the vernacular and chapter-based novels, which were adopted

¹ Chapter-based novels are a common form of Chinese fiction. Each chapter usually begins with a chanted poem and is followed by a story. The writers of chapter-based novels often employed this format to comment on social and political issues. Each chapter frequently ends with the set phrase: “If you would like to know what happened thereafter, that will be disclosed in the ensuing chapter” 欲知後事如何，且聽下回分解.
into the catechism. I then attempt to bring to light the similarities in the linguistic and literary devices used by the Jesuits and Protestant missionaries.

2 The Rise and Fall of the Jesuit Mission to China and the Protestants’ Memory of the Jesuits

The propagation of Christianity in China can be traced to the Tang dynasty (618–907). The Nestorian Stele entitled 大秦景教流行中國碑 (Stele to the propagation in China of the luminous religion of Daqin) records that Christians, led by a Persian missionary named Alopen (fl. seventh century), reached the Tang dynasty capital Xi’an in 635 CE and were allowed to establish places of worship and propagate their faith. With the aim of making Christianity more acceptable to the Chinese, the Nestorian missionary Jingjing 景淨 (fl. eighth century) used terminology from Daoism and Buddhism in stories written on the stele about God and Jesus. Yet, by the sixteenth century, after hundreds of years of illegal and underground activity, there is no reliable evidence of any practicing Christians in China. The Jesuit arrival in China marked a new era of exchange, not only between China and the West but also in the spread of Christianity. The Jesuits introduced Western science and knowledge into China, yet they also adapted themselves to the country’s customs and literary traditions. For they saw that, for the purposes of proselytization, they would need to avoid inadvertently denouncing China’s long-held traditions. They needed to let Christianity survive and co-exist with Confucianism, a tradition that was especially revered by the highest classes of society, including the emperors and the literati. The degree of the missionaries’ accommodation determined the extent to which their efforts would be recognized and how successful their proselytization among the Chinese would be.

Accordingly, when Ricci arrived in China in the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644), he adopted an accommodationist approach: he not only studied the Chinese classics but also aligned himself with the Confucianists and called himself a Xiru 西儒 (a “Western Confucianist”). He also learned Chinese and translated some of the Gospels. Ricci believed that monotheism was hidden in the ancient Chinese classics. However, in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century China, the Jesuits found that accommodating themselves

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2 The Nestorian Stele is a 279-centimeter tall limestone block with text documenting 150 years of early Christianity in China. It was written in Chinese and Syriac and was erected in 781.

3 Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism are often referred to as the three main religions in China. However Confucianism is closer to a school of philosophy than a religion.