

“On the Jesuits’ Quarrel with other Missionary Orders over Chinese Rites” (1774)

Abstract

This article about the Chinese Rites Controversy, which was published in the Enlightenment journal *Hannoverisches Magazin*, presents the history of the Jesuit mission in Asia and reports on conflicts between the Jesuits and other missionary orders regarding the practice of Chinese rites. Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, Jesuit missionaries had favored the method of “accommodation,” whereby newly converted Chinese Christians were allowed to retain their traditional rites and practices, such as ancestor worship and Confucianism. When the Dominicans and Franciscans arrived in Asia, they criticized the Jesuit missionaries for their lax approach to Catholicism and called for a ban on Chinese rites. In 1704, Pope Clement XI responded by prohibiting Chinese rites. Catholicism eventually declined in China and was forbidden by the emperor.

Source

[...]

Saint *Francis Xavier*, one of the first disciples of *Ignatius Loyola*, the founder of the Society of Jesus, made the greatest contribution to the work of converting the Indians. Around the middle of the sixteenth century, his zeal for his religion led him to *Goa* on the coast of Malabar, and from there to the Malulu Islands and Japan. From there he headed for China to proclaim Christianity in that empire as well, but he only got as far as the Chinese dependency *Shangchuan* Island, where he died in 1552. Since he had been buried there in lime, so as to make his body easier to transport to Goa once the lime had eaten away his flesh, his body was apparently still fresh and intact some month later, as the members of his order claim. For his zeal to extend the kingdom of his church, he was beatified by Paul V and canonized by Gregory XV, and in the canonization bull that was finally issued by Urban VIII, he was given the title “Apostle of the Indians.”

598. Saint Xavier bequeathed the zeal to bring the Chinese into the Roman religion and to subjugate this great empire to the papal chair by means of the same to his order, the Jesuits, who sent missionaries to that land from Macau. (The Chinese emperor had granted the Portuguese the right to occupy part of this coastal city, which was also under the dominion and oversight of the Mandarins there.) The first Jesuit fathers, who arrived there in 1583, were [Matteo] *Ricci*, *Roger* [Michael Ruggieri], and [Francesco] *Pasio*, only the first of whom remained there; the second went to Japan and the third returned to Rome. Of them, Father Caspar [Gaspar da Cruz], a Dominican, and Father Martin [de Rada], an Augustine, started preaching Christianity in 1556 and 1575, respectively, and like some Franciscans who followed them, they were met partly with approval but partly with resistance.

[...]

599. The Jesuits clearly recognized that, if their mission was to proceed more successfully, they needed to take a different approach from the [earlier one]. Since the attire, lifestyle, customs, and practices differ so greatly between the peoples of Asia and Europe, the Jesuits were easily able to conclude that they would be less likely to

suffer persecution among the former if they dressed like the Chinese and adopted their lifestyle and practices, and that gaining converts would be easier if there was less need for converts to deviate from their previous national customs. Father *Ricci* thus adopted the attire of a Chinese scholar; he gained favor and access to the great luminaries of the emperor's court through his knowledge of mathematics, astronomy, and physics. Father [Johann Adam] *Schall* [von Bell], a native of Cologne, who after the death of Ricci in 1610 became head of the Jesuit mission, achieved even greater esteem through these sciences and advanced conversions as a result. The Jesuits thus gave the Chinese, with their thirst for knowledge, instruction in the European sciences, in astronomy, and in wartime construction; they taught clockmaking and casting cannons, put the calendar in order, made maps of the empire's provinces, and allowed their converts to venerate Confucius and the dead, as is the custom in China.

[...]

600. As the Jesuits made Christianity more palatable to the Chinese than other missionaries did, and consequently accomplished more than the latter, they viewed the intellectual harvest of China as their property and were jealous that other monks also put their seals there. Consequently, they blocked those efforts as much as they could, and were blamed for it as a result. However, the other monks soon found out that the Jesuits allowed their new converts to retain customs that smacked of idolatry and could in no way coexist with Christianity. They accused the Jesuits of allowing the Christian Mandarins to prostrate themselves before the image of *Chin-hoang* in his temple twice a month, to offer the prescribed prayers, and to make sacrifices to him—as was also required of the Jesuits who held this distinction according to the laws of the land—the only stipulation being that they should direct their thoughts to a crucifix hidden in the temple or secretly carried on their persons. [The monks made further accusations] that the Jesuits allowed new converts to make sacrifices to Confucius and to deceased ancestors in heathen temples during the same ceremonies as the heathens; that they [the new converts] put up plaques with the names of their ancestors and of Confucius written in golden letters, prepared a table with food and drink at certain times, and burned candle and incense; and that they worshipped these plaques, as well as the graves of the deceased, by falling to the ground. The Dominican Father [Jean Bâtiste] *De Morales* and the Franciscan Brother *Anton von Santa Maria* [Antonio Caballero de Santa Maria], who were sent by their superiors on the Philippine Islands to China in 1633, first raised the subject of these privileges, reported them to their provincial superiors, and asked *Father Manuel Diaz*, a visitator of the Jesuits, why the Jesuits allowed the Christians such idolatrous customs. Diaz's answer was that he first had to hear the opinion of the vice provincial superior [Alberto] *Hurtado* on the subject. And so went the large, heated dispute about Chinese church customs between the Jesuits, on one side, and the missionaries from the other orders, especially the Dominicans and the Franciscans, on the other. It came down to two major points: 1) whether the Chinese with the word *tien*, "heaven," worship the physical heavens and nature, or the Lord of heaven and nature, and 2) whether the veneration of Confucius and the deceased is merely a secular ceremony and an expression of respect owed to great men and relatives, even after their deaths, or whether it is a worship service. The Jesuits maintained that it was nothing more than simple middle-class customs ordered by the state with no connection to religion, because the place where they occurred was not a temple but rather a hall, and because nothing was requested or hoped for from Confucius or the deceased. In contrast, the other missionaries considered these ceremonies to be genuine idolatrous sacrifices and maintained that the Jesuits were mixing idolatry with Christianity.

[...]

"Chinese Rites Controversy," in T. Worcester, SJ, ed., *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Jesuits*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017, p. 165.

David E. Mungello, *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning*. Nettetal: Steyler Verl., 1994.

Qiong Zhang, *Making the New World Their Own: Chinese Encounters with Jesuit Science in the Age of Discovery*. Leiden: Brill, 2015.

Source: „Von dem Streite der Jesuiten mit den Missionarien anderer Orden über die Chinesischen Gebräuche, welche jene ihren Neubekehrten zulassen“, in *Hannoversches Magazin* 12 (1774), Cols. 1167–94. Available online at: http://ds.ub.uni-bielefeld.de/viewer/resolver?urn=urn:nbn:de:0070-disa-2105263_012_7003

Translation: Kathleen Dell'Orto

Recommended Citation: “On the Jesuits’ Quarrel with other Missionary Orders over Chinese Rites” (1774), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-184>> [April 26, 2024].