

37. **STANDAERT, Nicolas**, *Chinese Voices in the Rites Controversy. Travelling Books, Community Networks, Intercultural Arguments*. (Bibliotheca Institutii Historici; 75). Rome, Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 2012. 473 pp.

When, in the 17th century, Jesuit missionaries arrived in China, they were facing a massive “cultural imperative” (Erik Zürcher, p. 217): late imperial upper class Chinese would not accept any outside religion if it was *xie*. That is to say, if it was religiously, ritually, socially and politically “heterodox.” Therefore, the Jesuits opted for an obviously disputable procedure. According to their discernment, Christianity in China should - just as Buddhism, Judaism and Islam had done - present itself as *compatible* to Confucianism, indeed *complementary* to it in enriching and fulfilling what was already there, *continuing* with some early, truly Chinese precedent, and *conforming* to the ethos and rituals of imperial China. Understandably, this option did not find unanimous approval in the Roman Church. Missionaries who opted for a more popular, less elitist, approach than the Jesuits incriminated a lack of Christian identity in the “rules of Matteo Ricci” and pleaded for a *contrasting* reaction to the Chinese cultural imperative, as opposed to the Jesuits’ complementary option. And what did the Chinese Christians think? This is the book’s theme; it leads us into the very first years of the 18th century.

The Dominican sinologist and missionary Francisco Varo († 1687) had accused many Chinese Christians of not truly living the Catholic faith. Following Varo’s criticism, the French vicar apostolic Charles Maigrot, a *Missions Etrangères* priest, took action. He started prohibiting offerings to Confucius, ancestral worship, and the use of names for God that were as not as unambiguously Christian as *tianzhu* (“Master of Heaven”): especially forbidden were *tian* (“heaven”) and *shangdi* (“First God”, p. 7). The prohibition did not go down well among all Chinese Christians. One of the reactions was co-ordinated by the well educated Chinese Jesuit Blasius Liu Yunde Verbiest († 1707; Liu had adopted the European sounding name in honour of the Flemish Jesuit Ferdinand Verbiest, who had baptized him in 1684). In October 1702, nineteen Christians gathered, following Liu’s suggestion, in Nanjing. There, they wrote a letter asking the Pope to revise Maigrot’s restrictions. By no means do the nineteen Christians manifest a reactionary traditionalism; rather, they argue soteriologically, missiologically and pastorally when they plea for a Christian permission of offerings to Confucius, ancestral worship and the usage of names like *tian* for God: “If one considers these three aspects as heterodox, then the Chinese as a result will suspect that the holy teaching is without rituals and righteousness; and that is an insurmountable hindrance. Would it not be somewhat contrary to the supreme intention of the missionaries, who travelled the seas in order to proclaim the teaching, that they would end up abandoning the souls of the ordinary Chinese people to the devil?” (p. 7). The bishop of Nanjing, Alessandro Ciceri, S.J., translated their letter into Latin and sent it to Rome. The case of the Nanjing letter is only one example of a whole wave of letter writing from Chinese Christians to the Pope: about 60 letters with 430 different signatories were translated into Latin and arrived in Rome in the course of the year 1704. In 1703 and 1704, the Belgian China missionary François Noël S.J., and his German fellow Jesuit Kaspar Castner wrote down their arguments for what we call today inculturation; they accompanied their own treatises with a Latin *Summarium* of the Chinese Christian testimonies. Thus backed up, they defended their case twice in front of Pope Clement XI. - eventually without success, as we know.

In 1995, a Chinese researcher, Huang Yilong, even called the Chinese letters the “neglected voices.” Neither did they become the decisive voice in the Rites Controversy, nor an object of scholarly study by today’s historians. The Belgian Jesuit Nicolas Standaert has now studied the Chinese originals of the letters, which are now held by the Roman Archive of the Society of Jesus. Standaert shows us that those voices were not neglected but, alas, “rejected” (p. 244). He reproduces the originals: more than 120 pages of Chinese, plus many of the manuscripts that contain the originals’ Latin translations. The author does not, however, offer his own complete translation of the texts here; he does provide extensive quotation in English rendering, but he is mostly drawing from the two *Summaria*; and his major interest is a socio-political and philosophical and theological reflection on the letters. He chooses three points of view: transmission of knowledge, analysis of networks, and hermeneutics of cultures.

The two *Summaria* represent a double overcoming of cultural dichotomy: they are the first Western text to argue from extensive knowledge of Chinese classics (p. 242); but they are no example of, one might say, “orientalism”: they do study those classical Eastern authors from the West but, by using the petitions, also look at them through the eyes of “Chinese (Christian) scholars” (p. 244).

The Chinese letters manifest five argumentative patterns: first, they make reference to Chinese Classics. For example, by showing that the Chinese serve their ancestors “as if” they were present, the Chinese Christians also say: of course, they are not really present. A second pattern is historical proof. They underline, e.g., that Confucius was no Buddha. The third type of argumentation takes another point of departure; it starts from Christian tradition and then demonstrates how much the Chinese rites conform to it, e.g. the Mosaic Commandment “honour your parents” is fulfilled by the Chinese respect to ancestors even when they have died. Hermeneutically, this reversal of inculturation is the most interesting development. While Matteo Ricci had argued that “Our Master of Heaven is precisely the High Lord as mentioned in the ancient classical texts,” the Chinese Christian Paul Yan Mo, quoted in the first *summarium*, can now offer the counterpart: “the ancient Chinese expression *shangdi* is precisely the same as the Western expression *tianzhu*” (p. 241). A fourth argumentative pattern is analogy. The authors substantiate how both Chinese and Christian traditions use figures of speech. When one adores *tian*, for example, one is not referring to “the blue sky” but to the Lord of the universe. The fifth argumentative type in the letters considers the expectable consequences if Rome should reject the Chinese rituals. Such a decision would, argue the letters, discourage the Chinese Christians, while it would increase the slander against them by the Chinese majority culture; and not only their fellow Chinese but also the Church in the West would now see her Chinese fellow Christians as having in fact practiced superstition. One statement is particularly clear: “If the Pope and the tribunals of the holy teaching prohibit these correct rituals, then in China people will no longer enter the Church, and consequently the gates of heaven will be closed for them; and Christians will be accused by others of committing harm and will be severely punished; [the Chinese Christians’] fervour will cool down and people from outside the Church will consider them as enemies; the priests in the different provinces will hardly escape the punishment of being expelled; this will greatly damage the position that the holy teaching has achieved” (p. 239). The following years would already have shown the truth of this prediction. - *Felix Körner, SJ.*