Did we overemphasize the negative impact

Of the Chinese Rites Controversy?

For the International Symposium in Commemoration of the 400th
Anniversary of Matteo Ricci 1552-1610
April 19-22, 2010

By Dr. Anthony S. K. Lam (林瑞琪博士)

Holy Spirit Study Centre, Hong Kong.

Abstract:

Matteo Ricci started a quite workable missionary model during his staying in China between 1582 and 1610. Some missionaries followed his practice, others did not.

The different approaches to missionary work aroused quarrels and debates between missionaries. Later on, the pro and con groups became two camps.

As the debate grew deeper, the Holy See and the Imperial Court got involved. It became known throughout the world as the sorrowful “Chinese Rites Controversy”.

The impact of the controversy lasted for about three hundred years until it was officially ended in 1939 when the Holy See issued the formal approval of Chinese rites.

Long ago, Church historians usually attributed the “failure” and the slow growth of the Catholic Church in China to the result of the Chinese Rites Controversy.

The year of 2009 marked the seventieth anniversary of the end of Rites Controversy while the year of 2010 marks the 400th anniversary of the death of Matteo Ricci. It is the suitable time to review this specific part of Catholic Church History in China.

A few questions, which are worth studying but long neglected by Church people as well as historians, will be discussed here. These questions include:

(1) Was the strategy of Ricci in Late Ming really applicable to the missionaries in
Early Qing years?
(2) Has the impact of changing government been underestimated?
(3) Would it have been avoidable if Emperor Kangxi had not gotten involved in the
debate?
(4) Has the viewpoint of Dominicans been long neglected?
(5) If the impact of Chinese Rites Controversy was so heavy, why have our Protestant
brethrens achieved a marvellous missionary success during the last two hundred
years in China? Some of them still reject the Chinese rites nowadays.

My concluding question will be:
Did we overemphasize the negative impact of Chinese Rites Controversy in the past,
to cover a lazy and ineffective strategy in evangelization work?

I am not going to give any answer to the questions in this paper, but I will leave it
to the audience for your consideration and reflection. I believe that the Catholic
evangelization work in China faces a very pessimistic future if we continue to neglect
these questions.
Was the strategy of Ricci in Late Ming really applicable to the missionaries in Early Qing?

Ricci’s missionary strategy was very straightforward. He started his journey from Macau and aimed at Peking the capital. Apparently the only aim of his journey was simply to try to convince the Emperor to accept Catholicism, then to convert the whole country.

Matteo Ricci had achieved quite a great success through his journey already, however, Emperor Wanli was obviously not a suitable person with whom the Italian missionary could work with. Historian Eric. O. Hanson wrote:

Before Ricci reached Peking, he had held the view that it was imperative to obtain imperial sanction to preach Christianity in the empire. This sanction would defend the church from persecution in the provinces. But on arriving in Peking in 1601, he discovered that the “Wan-li Emperor was not an autocrat, but the corrupt and weak ruler of a decaying dynasty in the hands of a horde of eunuchs.” He then felt it was better not to confront the emperor with the issue. (Hanson, 1980, p.16)

Ricci turned his focus to the class of scholar-officials (士大夫). Lee Ding-hok commented:

All his friends came from the intellectual class. Some of them were even officials working for the emperor. Those people were authoritative persons and had great influence upon the Ming Dynasty. Therefore, even after Ricci’s death, his missionary work could endure. The reason is that the Chinese scholars defended Catholicism. From this we can see that in the Ming society in which the Confucianists were a leading class, this missionary methodology, that is, the “from above methodology” was very effective. (Lee Ding-hok, 1982, p.138)

Whether this “methodology from above” is really effective is one thing. Whether it could be applied to the early Qing China is completely another thing.

Ricci’s strategy can work only in the context that the Emperor and his elite class represent the whole country. Obviously in Early Qing the situation is completely different. Emperor Shunzhi and Emperor Kangxi (together with their successors) were not viewed as symbols of the country. For the common people they were those who had usurped the power of the country.
The people, or at least the majority of ethnic Han, would not or could not follow the Manchu dynasty as “their” royal family.

I would like to raise one point: the Manchu Royal family’s traditional belief was Shamanism, a kind of folk religion in the Northeast China. Throughout the 267 years rule of the Qing Empire, however, they dared not to share their belief with local Chinese. It may come from the mysterious nature of Shaman. But more importantly was that, they knew very well not to interfere with the lives of the Chinese majority.

So, missionaries in Early Qing did not have the similar political ecology that Ricci had in the late Ming, but unfortunately did have the one more or less similar to Montecorvino’s situation in the late years of Yuan Dynasty.

What did the Qing Monarchy do to the common Han Ethnics? Let me quote a paragraph from famous Sinologist Ann Paludan:

The Qings had expelled all Chinese from Manchuria and confiscated large areas of land inside China, treating the peasants as slaves. Manchus and Chinese were segregated, intermarriage was banned and while footbinding was forbidden for Manchus, the Chinese men were forced to shave their hair in from and wear the hated Manchu queue (plait, 辫子). (Paludan, 1998, p. 193)

Such practices, together with the fact of the overthrown of the Ming Dynasty, generated a strong sense of anti-Qing sentiment among the majority Hans. Such mentality was so overwhelming that even one hundred years after the establishment of the Qing Dynasty, there were secret groups risking their lives to restore the Ming Monarchy.

So, obviously, even if the Jesuit missionaries could convert Emperor Shunzhi or Emperor Kangxi, there was no hope that the Emperors could change the mentality or the belief of the common people. Even though some emperors at the imperial court admired the missionaries’ work, one might wonder if the common people could have accepted the missionaries.

Under this circumstance we can believe that, the more the royal family got close to the missionaries, the more the common people wanted to keep distance from them.
Has the impact of changing government been underestimated?

The change of monarchy raised a new questions: Who are the intellectuals? Are they the one working for the government, or are they the one working against the government? Let us go back to 1650 and see what happened in Southern China. Brilliant American Historian Jonathan D. Spence wrote:

After the failure of the Yangzi valley and coastal regimes, the prince of Gui (桂王) became the final hope of the Ming imperial cause. The last known surviving grandson of Wanli, the prince was a pampered twenty-one year old when Peking fell, and had no experience in government or military affairs.

Over the objection of his mother, who warned that he was too young and delicate for the role, a group fugitive officials named him emperor there in late 1646. Forced out of Guangdong (廣東) province by Qing force, the prince of Gui and his court spent the next year and a half roaming across Guangxi (廣西), based most often in either Guilin (桂林) or Nanning (南寧).

In 1648, a number of former Ming officials who had been collaborating with the Manchu threw off their allegiance to the Qing and declared themselves dedicated to the cause of Ming restoration. The prince of Gui suddenly found himself welcomed back to Zhaoqing by numerous and enthusiastic supporters, while the Manchu troops in Canton were massacred. (Spence, 1990, p.37)

Another historian, L.A. Struve, wrote another side of the story.

One interesting indication of the anxiety that afflicted the Inner Court at this time is the solicitation of spiritual (and possible political) assistance by Senior Empress Dowager Wang (王太后) and eunuch Director of Ceremonial Pang Tien-shou (龐天壽) from Pope Innocent X in Rome. Pang, Chu Shih-szu (瞿式耜) and Chu’s most stalwart subordinate commander, Chiao Lien (焦鑣), previously had been baptized as Christians and probably had introduced the imperial family to the German Jesuit missionary Andreas Koffler, SJ (瞿紗微). Subsequently, Koffler had baptized the senior and junior empresses dowager, the empress, and the heir-apparent. But apart from submitting a Western calendar for official use by the court, which later was rejected by conservative officials, he
exerted no discernible influence on Yung-li (永曆帝) politics. (Struve, 1984, p.241)

Here Catholic missionaries played an important role during this politically unstable situation.

Koffler’s assistant, the Polish Jesuit Michael Boym, (卜彌格, 1612-1659) had accompanied the court in its 1650 flight from Chao-ching (肇慶) to Wu-chou (梧州); it was he who subsequently agreed to carry two letters, dated November 1 and 4, from the senior empress dowager, and Pang to the Vatican. These letters begged the pope to pray for their souls and for restoration of the Ming Dynasty, and to send more Catholic priests to China. (Struve, 1984, p. 241)

According to Struve (1984, p. 242), by 1658, however, by the time Boym finally was able to return to the Tonkin Gulf (東京灣) with a spiritually uplifting but politically noncommittal letter from Pope Alexander VII, both the senior empress dowager and Pang had died, and the Yung-li court had been forced deep into the Southwest beyond his reach.

According to Chinese Catholic historian Fr. Fang Hao (方豪), however, the encountering between Chu. Pang and Koffler had also a military aspect. Fang wrote:

At the time when Emperor Yung-li came to the throne (1647), Chu Shih-szu had assigned Pang Tien-shou to go to Macau with Francois Sambiasi (畢方濟 1582-1649) asking for military support. The Portuguese sent 300 troops in return, together with a few cannons. Fr. Andrea Xavier Koffler served as chaplain. From March to May, Chu recovered quite a great amount of land from the Qing Army. (Fang, 1967, p.283)

Eventually the Southern Ming Court was not a successful one. The small monarchy was overthrown by the Qing army. Koffler and Boym died with (and also died for) the Southern Ming Court.

But another Jesuit missionary Fr. Adam Schall made a completely different choice. He decided to stay at the royal court in the Peking and to work with the new regime. According to Fr. Ryan, SJ,

The senior regent of the new boy emperor (Shunzhi) admired Fr. Schall and his work, and frequently visited him, and finally had him named Director of the Bureau of Astronomy (欽天監). (Ryan, 1964, p.50)
For Chinese it was totally difficult to imagine that this foreigner who had enjoyed high privilege from the Ming Court suddenly changed his loyalty to the conqueror. I am not blaming Adam Schall here. But it is obvious that his decision of working with the new court may have caused great puzzlement to the local Chinese, including to the lay Catholics.

We should not forget that throughout the first hundred years, the traditional prominent Catholic families, including the family of Wang Zheng (王徵) and the family of Xu Guangqi (徐光啟), seldom attended the government examinations.

Conclusion: The missionaries who arrived in China in late Ming would like to continue working with the Qing Emperors, but the lay Catholics would not do so. Therefore, far before the outbreak of the Rite Controversy, the Catholic intellectuals had already separated themselves from the government intellectuals.

Would it have been avoidable if Emperor Kangxi had not gotten involved in the debate?

It is clear that the Chinese Rites Controversy is a disaster to the Catholic Church in Early Qing China. But it is so far not clear why the Emperor Kangxi got involved.

If we go through the historical process of the disputes between the different relevant sides, we will find that the involvement of the Emperor Kangxi was not only unnecessary but actually very harmful to the parties involved. Obviously the Rite Controversy was purely an ecclesiastical event and ought to have been settled within the Church.

The confrontation between the two sides of the Catholic Church in the Early Qing was, to some extent, quite similar to the situation of the dispute between the open side and the underground side of the Catholic Church in China today. If the Church community of today has any disputes, they should appeal to the Holy See for settlement. If any of them appeal to the civil authority, it will never achieve a real solution but instead just make the situation even worse. Chinese historian Lee Shiu Keung made a very clear elaboration of the process in detail:
In September 1645, a decree of the Congregation (of Propaganda Fide) banned the rites. The Jesuits were fully aware that they had been misrepresented by De Morales. They sent their learned member Martin(o) Maritini (衛匡國) to Rome to explain the rites as permitted by the Jesuit Mission in China. The result was that in March 1656, another decree permitted Chinese Christians to practice the rites under the specific conditions laid down by the Jesuits.……

In 1693, the French Vicar Apostolic Charles Maigrot (顏璽) issued peremptory orders that the terms Tien and Shang-ti were not to be used of God and that the customary rites for the dead were to be banned. Maigrot further stated that any description of Confucianism should be carefully worded; such a saying as “Confucius’ rituals to the spirits are cultural rather than religious” was misleading. His pastoral letter was forwarded to Rome. Meanwhile in 1706 the Jesuits in Peking referred to the Emperor Kangxi for his opinion on the subject. Kangxi obliged with a statement to the effect that the Chinese people kept their ancestral tablets to express their sense of gratitude for parental care and upbringing.……

As to Heaven, Kangxi wrote, “It is not the material sky. When an official addresses a memorial to the throne expressing his sense of gratitude, he refers to the Emperor as Your Majesty’s Terrace or Steps or when an official passes by the Throne he gives it its due respect.…… To call Heaven Shang-ti is the same as to call the Emperor Wan-sui (萬歲) or Huang-shang (皇上). The names might be different but the sense of respect is one.” (Lee, S.K., 1971, p.73-75)

Lee Shiu Keung also pointed out the “political impact” of the Emperor’s response. “But this pagan intervention in theological matters was exactly what the Congregation (of Propaganda fide) and the Holy Office resented. On November 20, 1704, a decree of the Holy Office banned the rites. (Lee, S.K., 1971, p.74-75)

In 1705 the Papal Legate Patriarch Maillard de Tournon (宗座特使多羅) arrived in Beijing. The Emperor’s position as communicated to de Tournon was that the Holy See must accept the Chinese rites as compatible with Christian belief or that Christianity must disappear from China. De Tournon’s position was that only the Pope could make such a decision, not the Emperor. His mission ended in failure. (O’Toole, 1992, p.39)

When Kangxi had a chance to read the translation, he was angered by the bull.
He felt hurt. So he banned all missionaries work. Kangxi wrote:

In reading this document, one can only say that the little men of Western countries are in no position to discuss the great ways of China. Alas, no Westerner can master the Chinese classics. Their conversation and their opinions often provoke laughter. Now as I read this foreign subject’s declaration, it is indeed very much akin to the heresy and sectarianism of the Buddhist monks and Taoist priests. There is no more striking example of sheer ignorance. Henceforth, no Westerner shall preach in the Middle Kingdom. We shall prohibit them in order to avoid further trouble.

Unfortunately, however, the popes did not aim at hurting the emperor. Emperor Kangxi felt hurt purely because of a historical coincidence. If the Jesuits did not appeal the case to him, he might not have become involved. Both the Holy See and the Emperor are innocent in this case. But we have to say that both sides were hurt.

It is true that the ban of Chinese Rites made Catholicism unpopular. Being unpopular is one thing, but prohibition of the Catholic belief is totally another thing. According to Hanson, when Rome maintained its position, Kangxi’s successor proscribed Christianity. The local Chinese churches went underground. (Hanson, 1980, p.17)

Has the viewpoint of Dominicans been long neglected?

Throughout the two centuries, the Catholic Church in modern China have listened so much to Jesuit historians, such as D’elia, Ryan, Motte and Hsu Zongze. Now is it the time for us to pay a little bit more attention to our Dominican brothers?

Just let me quote three long paragraphs from Dominican History Professor Fidel Villarroel. I am doing it not because of my laziness. I am usually lazy but not in this case, as I find his thought very essential for the discussion. Villarroel (1993) wrote,

After some study of Chinese classic literature, Ricci advanced the theory
that, in former times, the religion of China had been monotheistic, and there were similarities between the ancient religious beliefs and Christianity. Nothing could be more pleasing to a Chinese sympathetic to Christianity. People could be told that their beliefs were not completely wrong after all, but only different. Perhaps their ancestors were not damned; their rites were compatible with the Christian faith.

Anyone can see that such theory was tempting and attractive. But it had its dangers, like the dispensations and omissions permitted by Ricci to his converts. Ricci produced a catechism in which he made no mention of six out the seven sacraments and he bypassed the five commandments of the Church. And, what was even more disturbing, he was careful not to display the crucifix too freely or to mention the doctrine of the Passion of Christ for fear that the Chinese could be scandalized at the idea of a crucified God. Here we have an accommodation policy designed to go along the tastes of the Chinese. Would this policy not entail some dangers for the integrity of the Christian doctrine and practice? Would it not lead to syncretism, to an amorphous confusion of pagan and Christian beliefs? Did his fellow Jesuits think like him? (Villarroel, 1993, p.20)

Villarroel pointed out some minor but interesting differences between Jesuits and the mendicant orders. He wrote,

The Franciscans and Dominicans believed that the vow of poverty bound them in China as anywhere else in the world, and they should give testimony to Christ through their poverty. They shunned silk robes and avoided being carried about in sedan chairs. Silk robes were hardly compatible with religious poverty. The Dominican Cocchi was once asked by his converts to don a dress in the style of their magnates. He refused, for he was “contented with poor habits, food and treatment, befitting one who went there to preach the crucified Christ to the poor and the humble”. The friars found it hard to excuse the Jesuits’ trading activities. They maintained that evangelization from the lower classes upward was not only more evangelical but also more fruitful. Yet – as Cummins correctly observes – neither the Orders nor the Jesuits ever limited themselves exclusively to any social class or group in China. (Villarroel, 1993, p.26)

Villarroel did not overlook the importance of Jesuits’ considerations. He (1993) noted,

The Jesuits, for their part, had strong reservations about the friars’ way of
preaching which was so un-Chinese. They harshly criticized their imprudent and aggressive manner of presenting the Gospel, different from the Jesuit cautious and ceremonious suavity, more in accord with the refined Chinese etiquette. Actually, Jesuit fears of Chinese reactions to high-sounding street preaching were not without foundation. It was true that the friars, claiming to be heralds of the Gospel, behaved as though they should put human respect aside and assertively and publicly present Christ as he lived and died, and not even the likelihood of persecution or even martyrdom deterred them. Between the year of their arrival and 1639 there were several cases of the friars risking their freedom and lives on account of their behaviour. (Villarroel, 1993, p.26-27)

I am not going to judge who is right and who is wrong. I am also not in any position to overwrite Jesuit historical record with Dominican argument. What I would like to do is simply to raise one point: Have we listened too little to the Dominican side?

**Protestants’ Success**

The last point I would like to highlight in this paper is: If the impact of Chinese Rites Controversy was so traumatic, why have our Protestant brethrens achieved such a marvelous missionary success during the last two hundred years in China? We should not forget that some of the Chinese Protestant followers still reject the Chinese rites even today.

Here underneath is a table of a simple statistics of the development of Protestant followers and the Catholic followers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Protestant followers</th>
<th>Number of Catholic followers</th>
<th>Ratio of Protestants to Catholics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1815</td>
<td>About 20</td>
<td>215,000</td>
<td>1 to 10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>85,000</td>
<td>742,000</td>
<td>1 to 8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>366,000</td>
<td>2,000,000</td>
<td>1 to 5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>700,000</td>
<td>3,000,000</td>
<td>1 to 4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>3,000,000</td>
<td>6,000,000</td>
<td>1 to 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>8,000,000</td>
<td>8,000,000</td>
<td>1 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>36,000,000</td>
<td>12,000,000</td>
<td>3 to 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From the tables we can see two points. First, the growth rate of the Protestant followers is always greater than that of the Catholic followers. Even though they started two centuries later than we did, but they completely caught up with us in 150 years. Then they surpassed us and left us far behind.

Secondly, most Protestant missionaries also have to cope with the problem of Chinese Rite. But they seemed not affected by this “negative” factor.

In 1939 the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of Faith in the Vatican issued the Instruction Plane Compertum Est, and clearly declared the official end of the Chinese Rites Controversy. The Catholic in China, however, did not experience any tremendous increase in believers.

I myself have to admit that the lifting of the prohibition against Chinese Rites was absolutely a positive thing for the Catholic Church in China. It is a very timely move to enhance Catholic missionary works. But I have to find out the secret of our Protestant sisters and brothers. They resisted so strongly against the Chinese Rites and even so they are still very successful.

Obviously the Protestant missionaries are very brave to confront any cultural differences. I would like to ask one question: Is it because at the very beginning Ricci and his partners dared not to confront any cultural difference so that they became very passive throughout the missionary process?

Did we the Catholic historians overemphasize the negative impact of Chinese Rites Controversy in the past, to cover a lazy and ineffective strategy in evangelization work?

If you are a Catholic, ask yourself a question before discussing this issue: Did you carry out any evangelization work during the last few years?

Nowadays, there is no Chinese Rites Controversy. What make us so lazy?

Don’t blame the predecessors! The Rites Controversy was a tragedy, but it was not necessary the reason of the slowness of the evangelization work.
Reference:

中國第一歷史檔案館編，2003，《清中前期西洋天主教在華活動檔案史料（第一冊）》，北京，中華書局。


Fang Hao (方豪), 1967,《中國天主教史人物傳》第一冊，台灣光啟出版社、香港公教真理學會。

Ryan, T.F., 1964, *Jesuit in China*, Hong Kong, Catholic Truth Society