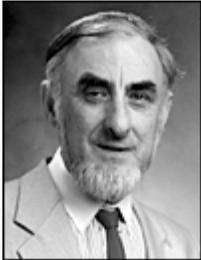


Pacific Rim Report No. 32, February 2004

The Chinese Rites Controversy: A Long Lasting Controversy in Sino-Western Cultural History

by Paul Rule, Ph.D.

The Ricci Institute at the University of San Francisco Center for the Pacific Rim has for many years been involved in the study of the Chinese Rites Controversy. This commitment dates back to the early 1980s when Fr. Edward Malatesta, S.J., founding director of the Ricci Institute, had returned from his initiation to Chinese studies in Taiwan to his old mentor, Fr. Francis Rouleau, S.J. A former China-missionary and historian of the Jesuit mission in China, Fr. Rouleau projected a scholarly study of the Chinese Rites issue in conjunction with the Ricci Institute. Now, over the last four years and at the invitation of the Ricci Institute, a team of scholars has been involved in our renewed effort to continue this task.



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The Chinese Rites Controversy project draws upon the Rouleau collection of copies of documents from European archives and the resources of Fr. Albert Chan's Chinese Library at the Ricci Institute as well as the library and electronic resources of the University of San Francisco. We have also found enormously helpful the digests and drafts by Rouleau and Malatesta in the Ricci Institute's Rouleau Collection. This issue of Pacific Rim Report is the first report on our work in progress.

We gratefully acknowledge the EDS-Stewart Chair for Chinese-Western Cultural History at the USF Ricci Institute and The Henry Luce Foundation for funding this issue of Pacific Rim Report.

It is hard for us in the twenty-first century to view, with anything but repugnance and incomprehension, the vehemence and bitterness of seventeenth-eighteenth-century religious controversy. The Chinese Rites Controversy was perhaps the most bitter and long-lasting of all. The grand old man of China mission history, Henri Bernard-Maitre S.J., even argued that it was possibly in terms of the number and caliber of the participants, its length and ferocity, the greatest internal struggle in the long history of the Catholic Church notwithstanding the early Councils.^[1]

Furthermore, it was not just a matter for churchmen, the battleground of theologians, and ecclesiastical politicians. It engaged philosophers and intellectuals generally, including some of the best minds of the time. It raged intermittently from the 1630s, flared at the end of the century and continued well into the eighteenth century. And it had consequences and echoes up to the present day.

The specific questions at issue may seem obscure and irrelevant: whether a handful of Chinese Christian converts might or might not continue to perform rituals in honor of their ancestors, and some related problems such as how to render the name of God in Chinese (the 'terms' question); whether Christian mandarins might perform rituals to Confucius and other official rituals such as those to the guardian spirits of their city; and more general issues still of accommodation of Western Christian liturgy and church law and practices to Chinese conditions. However, the controversy was also exacerbated by tensions and jealousies between missionaries of differing religious orders and national origins. In this respect it was a microcosm of a large number of theological, cultural, and political differences.

With the coming of Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century the problem recurred in a new form. Through their strong Biblicism the Protestant missionaries, apart from a horror of 'idolatry', were faced with the dilemma of translating the biblical Yahweh/Theos into Chinese. So as well as having to negotiate the dangerous rapids of Chinese ancestor and other rituals, like their Catholic predecessors they



Fanciful depiction of a Jesuit church in Beijing with people bowing, burning incense, and offering food before the high altar. (A. Thomas, *Histoire de la mission de Pékin*, Paris, 1923, p. 145)

had to engage with the Chinese ‘terms’ issue. Tian (Heaven,), they tended to equate with imperial idol worship. In their anxiety to stress their difference from the Catholics, they eschewed the Catholic compromise Tianzhu (Lord of Heaven,). So the argument came down to a choice between Shangdi (the traditional ‘Lord on High’,) and shen (a generic term for gods or spirits,). Two versions of the Chinese bible were thus created: a Shangdi and a Shen version. But this, in turn, influenced judgments about ancestor rituals. When David Crockett Graham, a Protestant missionary in Southwest China and excellent ethnographer, found that the common people regarded their ancestors as shen, he abandoned his earlier toleration of ancestor rituals because he thought this prima facie evidence of idolatry—they equated their ancestors with his God.[2]

The problem of interpreting key terms is not just one concerning Chinese terminology. Some three centuries later we frequently are struck by what appear to be paradoxes and contradictions in the European labels being flung around so freely by the protagonists. How could the Chinese be simultaneously ‘atheists’ and ‘idolaters’, ‘materialists’ and ‘superstitious’? What was the emotional freight of such terms? And did their commonly used equivalents in the various European languages have the same implications in each? Many, on closer inspection, appear to be code words, revealing theological partisanship and institutional allegiance.

The forces allied against the ‘permissive’ policies of the missionaries of the Society of Jesus were in some ways a strange coalition: Roman curial centralizers, Gallican supporters of national autonomy in religion, Europeanizers who wished to impose Western styles of Christianity everywhere, and those who, for want of a better term, we may call ‘Augustinians’, with a deep pessimism about the possibilities of salvation outside the Catholic Church. Added to this potent mixture were old jealousies and rivalries among religious orders and between ‘regular’ and ‘secular’ clergy, and especially between colonizing powers.

Even more, however, the Chinese Rites controversy raises in an acute and illustrative form, many theoretical and practical issues that are very much alive today. When post-modernist and post-structuralist theory and relativist philosophies challenge the very possibility of cross-cultural understanding, a close study of a classic case of this may prove enlightening. Similarly it may illuminate the debates about the relativity of language.[3] Galileo’s alleged remark *eppur se muove*, ‘and yet it does move’, remains the best rebuttal of too much skeptical and paralyzing theory.

On the other hand, the endless and ultimately stultifying arguments about words—Chinese words for ‘God’, whether ancestor rituals were ‘sacrifices’ and the buildings they were held in ‘halls’ or ‘temples’—remind us that words divide and obfuscate as well as communicate. Actions, experience, personal interaction may overcome apparently insuperable obstacles to communication. One in our time who knew this better than most, the Cistercian monk Thomas Merton, protested:

There has been endless definition, endless verbalizing, and words have become gods. There are so many words that one cannot get to God as long as He is thought to be on the side of the words. But when he is placed firmly beyond the other side of words, the words multiply like flies and there is a great buzzing religion, very profitable, very holy, very spurious. [4]

Much of the tragedy of the Chinese Rites lies in the inability of old China hands to verbalize and defend their intuitions and perceptions. Their theology could not keep up with their experience.



Photostat of an early Qing Christian ancestral tablet. (George H. Dunne, S.J., *Generation of Giants. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962, p. 293. The original is in the Bibliothèque National de Paris)*

In a time when Christianity, in numbers and expression, is, for the first time since its beginnings, unequivocally non-Western, issues of enculturation, its preconditions and limits,



'Red Manifesto': The Chinese emperor Kangxi (1662–1722), disturbed by the failure of his Jesuit ambassadors to return to China, sent out this document in three languages requesting news. (Collection of the Ricci Institute. Preservation of this document is made possible by the Klitgaard Endowment at the Ricci Institute)

are urgent for the Christian churches and amount to a “new universal rites controversy.”^[5] In theology, theology of religions, the theological assessment of the religious ‘other’, is fast emerging as the main item on the agenda. There could hardly

be found a more contemporary and urgent problem in the history of religion and history in general than the assessment of the first modern crisis in these areas. And, needless to say, it is relevant to the current state of Chinese government and Vatican relations.^[6]

The Chinese Catholic church today, as in the past, is faced with problems of connecting traditional with contemporary culture. ‘Culture fever’^[7] and clashing ideologies have made the situation far more complex than in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but, again, there are lessons to be drawn from history. In China itself, historians are taking more and more interest in the Jesuit experience in China, and in the Chinese Rites Controversy.

Western historians of China, too, are turning in increasing numbers to what was once regarded as a backwater of Ming-Qing studies. In the light of a renewed interest in local history and cultural and social diversity on the part of social historians of China, the acute differences among missionaries takes on a new significance. Part, at least, of the obstinacy with which various proponents of positions on the Chinese Rites propounded their views, is now seen as arising from their very different local experiences.

More, though, we would argue, came from their differing theological interpretations of what they observed. Notoriously, different religious orders had divergent theologies, and none more so than the two ‘intellectual’ orders, the Society of Jesus and the Order of Preachers. Jesuits and Dominicans lined up on opposite sides on the theology of grace, on moral casuistry, and on the Christian response to modern science. By the end of the seventeenth century with French Jesuits and French priests from the Missions Étrangères de Paris arriving in large numbers, the shadow of the Jansenist controversy reached out to China. China became a sort of surrogate battleground for European ecclesiastical conflicts.

Amongst these conflicts was a jurisdictional struggle between the Vatican bureaucracies, especially the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide), the religious orders, especially the Jesuits, and the old ‘Catholic’ monarchies of Portugal, Spain, and France. The papal legations to China of Charles Maillard de Tournon and Carlo Ambrogio Mezzabarba were crucial episodes in this bitter battle and further complicated the Chinese Rites issue.^[8]

There is, too, a major cultural shift that occurred during the period under discussion which deeply affected the course of events. William Bouwsma has recently pointed to a pervasive cultural change that occurred during the period between the arrival of the Jesuits in China and the outbreak of the Rites Controversy, which he calls “the waning of the Renaissance.”^[9] There was, as he sees it, a deep-seated anxiety displacing Renaissance optimism, and marked by a desire for order, uniformity, centralized authority, and certainty.^[10] Some, he thinks, found it in scholasticism, some in closed schemes of logic and scientific rigor, some in externally imposed juridical regimes. It is surely significant that these categories embrace most of the opponents of the Chinese Rites.

Why should ritual have been the contested ground rather than belief systems or morality? Contemporary ritual theory has demonstrated the centrality of issues of orthopraxis over against orthodoxy. In China, where ritual was very much a concern of the state, this was especially the case. The Jesuits appreciated this sensitivity and attempted to retain as much as possible of the domestic and public ritual practice.

Another ritual question was that of Catholic liturgy. Uniformity of liturgy was one thrust of the counter-Reformation although not, perhaps, one that the Jesuits, an order without prescribed common liturgical practices, worried about too much. Very early in the history of the China mission, however, they made



Illustrations of missionaries depicted in Chinese style: Dominican (left) and Jesuit (right). (J.S. Cummins, ed., *The Travels and Controversies of Friar Domingo Navarrete 1618–1686*. London, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1962, p. xxxiv)



Portrait of Charles Thomas Maillard de Tournon, Papal Legate to the Court of Peking in the early eighteenth century. (Mme Yves de Thomas de Bossière, *Un belge mandarin à la cour de Chine aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles: Antoine Thomas 1644–1709 Ngan to P'ing-Che*, Paris: Les belles Lettres, 1977)

innovations such as covering rather than uncovering the head while celebrating mass. Their even more radical proposal for a liturgy in the Chinese language came to nothing after initial approval by Rome—further evidence of a tightening up at the center.^[11] This and the associated issue of training a Chinese clergy in China in Chinese, is not strictly part of the Rites Controversy, but attitudes taken towards it serve as a kind of litmus-test of attitudes towards Chinese rituals and culture, as do positions on enforcing European practices of mass attendance and abstinence from work on Sundays and feast days.

It is very difficult to conduct a historical and ethnographic study of the rituals involved, especially ancestor and funeral rituals. The earlier literature is mainly prescriptive and ideological, useful to some extent, but not for establishing what was actually done. There is a vast nineteenth and twentieth century descriptive literature from missionaries and other western observers which seems to depict totally different practices in different parts of China. As for the intentions and motivations of the participants—the key issue in terms of Christian morality—observers and participants constantly contradict each other. Even the advent of scientific ethnography and sociology failed to resolve basic questions of social and personal (including religious) meanings of ancestor rituals.^[12] This literature

will be surveyed for the questions it raises and critically examined just as the accounts by protagonists in the Rites Controversy, but the issues do not seem capable of resolution by this route.

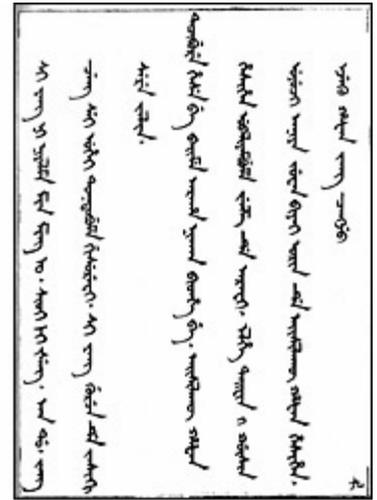
On the other hand, the debates among the missionaries and their Chinese converts shed some light on major questions in late Ming/early Qing intellectual history. Among these are the centrality of cosmology, naturalism and transcendence, interpretation of the Chinese classics (jing), the boundaries of orthodoxy and the relationship of the three main traditions (jiao), Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. (It is worth noting here that the Jesuits and their converts while accepting, unlike many modern commentators, that these three were religions, or ‘laws’ (leggi) as they called them, did not reify them as ideologies, ‘-isms’ in the modern jargon.

One of the major problems in discussing the Rites Controversy is the enormous bulk of the documentation. On the one hand, recently published catalogues and electronic storage have improved our control of what Bernard-Maître called “this thick jungle” of material.^[13] On the other, new sources are constantly emerging, especially as Chinese archives are opened.^[14] The major European archives are now accessible but the archives of the Holy office were opened only in the course of the writing of this study and we have been unable to use them. The great church historian, Ludwig von Pastor, wrote in the early twentieth century: “A satisfactory history of the dispute about the rites has not yet been written, nor is such a history possible at the present.”^[15] Our hope is that it is now possible, but our conclusions on some key issues must remain provisional; our study aims to be comprehensive but has no claims to be definitive.

The sources are so widely dispersed geographically and in so many languages, and historical forms of those languages, that it was clear from the beginning that any project for a history of the Chinese Rites Controversy would require a team effort and a documentation center. Fortunately, the Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History at the University of San Francisco is ideally suited for the task. In the first place it houses the magnificent collection of documentary material collected over a lifetime by Fr. Francis Rouleau, S.J.,^[16] and ably organized by his niece, Sr. Mary Celeste Rouleau, R.S.M. Its founding director, the late Fr. Edward Malatesta S.J. launched the Institute primarily to enable research and publication on the Chinese Rites issue. Secondly, its Ricci 21st Century Roundtable Database and other electronic resources have facilitated the collection and storage of additional material as well as the organization of the Rouleau collection. And, fortuitously, the endowed EDS-Stewart Chair for Chinese-Western Cultural History, Dr. Paul Torrens, a long-time friend of the Ricci Institute, and more recently The Henry Luce Foundation, have provided the considerable funding needed for the task.

Most of the documentation has been personally examined by one or more members of the project team during our combined many years of personal research in the relevant archives. In some cases we have been obliged to rely on summaries and excerpts by Francis Rouleau and others; however, this has not been done for any of the crucial episodes where we have attempted to work from a documentation as complete as possible using copies of original documents as well as published versions.

One of the virtues of a team approach is that it has enabled us to pool expertise, linguistic and disciplinary. The need for acquaintance with several European languages, including Latin, with Chinese and to a lesser extent Manchu and Japanese, is obvious. Not so obvious, however, is some knowledge of philosophy, theology, and church history. Some of the most eminent sinologists have made fundamental and elementary interpretative errors in references to the Chinese Rites and Chinese



Detail of the Manchu language introduction to *Brevis Relatio*, an explanation of the Kangxi emperor's declaration about the Chinese terms for God and the non-religious nature of the Chinese Rites. (Antoine Thomas, et al, *Brevis Relatio...* Peking, 1701. Collection of the Ricci Institute)

Christianity through ignorance of Christian theology and history.

Such a wide-ranging and long-lasting issue demands generous treatment. Many episodes have been examined and the vast literature, published and unpublished, explored, but we have lacked until now a comprehensive treatment. This study aims to be that. Not that all episodes can be adequately discussed even in several volumes, but we aim to shed light on dark places and to indicate where darkness still lies. It will have succeeded if it opens up more questions than it closes and stimulates more investigation of key episodes and historical problems.

We have tried to avoid partisanship, advocacy for one or other side. This is a difficult task. As Michel de Certeau has perceptively noted, the very necessary act of empathy with participants in religious polemics of the past may lead to a distortion of the organization of a work of 'scientific research', to, as Lucien Febvre put it, "slipping under the cassock."^[17] We have tried to let all parties speak, to consider and weigh all the literature. However, there are two unavoidable biases in this project.

One is that the basic documentation as collected by Francis Rouleau had a Jesuit origin. We have supplemented this as far as possible by other sources but cannot devote another lifetime or several to assembling all possible sources. All published sources have been used, but many relevant items remain unused and even uncatalogued. Our hope is that we may stimulate the emergence into the light of the present day some new and significant items now lost in private^[18] and public collections.

The second is that the old Jesuit position in so many ways coincides with contemporary prejudices and values and this is less easily overcome. Again, all we can do is to locate the positions of the participants in their cultural and educational context.

However, there is another way we have tried to bypass the biases of the original controversy. Our approach is unabashedly sino-centric, that is, our prejudices, if such there be, lie with the nascent Chinese Church and the Christians whose voices were largely ignored in the centers of Christianity. Wherever possible, we have tried to recover the view of these seventeenth-and-early-eighteenth-century adherents of the Tianzhu Jiao (Lord of Heaven Religion,). This has been made feasible by recent reprint series, the publication of official Chinese documents, and published catalogues of major European collections.

The editor remembers when first entering this field of research over three decades ago being told that there were only three or four people in the world, all ex-missionaries, who were interested in such an obscure branch of Chinese and religious studies. Today conferences, symposia, journals, and research institutes working in the area abound. It seems time for an attempt at synthesis, one which the authors expect will soon be superseded as new insights and new sources emerge. Our hope is that our readers will become as fascinated by the clash of personalities and ideas as we are.

ENDNOTES

1. H. Bernard-Maître S.J., "Chinois (Rites)," in *Dictionnaire d'Histoire et de Géographie Ecclesiastiques*. XII, Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1953, cols. 731–41, and col. 931. [\[Return to Text\]](#)
2. D. C. Graham, *Folk Religion in Southwest China*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1961, p. 120. [\[Return to Text\]](#)
3. As, for example, in Alfred Bloom, *The Linguistic Shaping of Thought: A Study in the Impact of Language on Thinking in China and the West*. Hillsdale, N.J. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1981. See, especially, Christoph Harbsmeier, "Language and Logic," in Joseph Needham, ed., *Science and Civilisation in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, vol. 7, part 1. [\[Return to Text\]](#)
4. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth*. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Giroux, 1993, p. 225. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

5. Karl Rahner, "Rites Controversy: New Tasks for the Church," in *Theological Investigations*. Vol. 24, New York: Crossroads, 1991, p. 136. [[Return to Text](#)]
6. It is interesting to note that a strong critic of the 'official' Catholic Church in China, the late Lazlo Ladany S.J., linked his critique with the defense of "the integrity of the faith" that he saw in the Rites decision. See L. Ladany, *The Catholic Church in China*. New York: Freedom House, 1987, p. 79. [[Return to Text](#)]
7. Strictly, the term applies to the fierce debates of the 1980s over the viability and direction of Chinese culture, but the issues have not been resolved and continue to surface. In religion, both 'Culture Christianity' and the Falun Gong phenomenon demonstrate its centrality. [[Return to Text](#)]
8. On the complex mutual entanglement of the Chinese Rites issue see the introduction to the forthcoming *De Kangxi para o papa, pela via de Portugal* by António Vasconcelos de Saldanha. [[Return to Text](#)]
9. William J. Bouwsma, *The Waning of the Renaissance, 1550–1640*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2000. [[Return to Text](#)]
10. See, especially, Chapter 12, "The Quest for Certainty." [[Return to Text](#)]
11. François Bontinck, *La lutte autour de la liturgie chinoise aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*. Louvain (Nauwelaerts)/Paris (Beatrice-Nauwelaerts): Publications de l'université Lovanium de Léopoldville, 11, 1962. [[Return to Text](#)]
12. Maurice Freedman, "Ancestor Worship: Two Faces of the Chinese Case," in *Social Organization: Essays Presented to Raymond Firth*. Chicago: Aldine Press, 1967. pp. 85–103. It gives an excellent presentation of the interpretative dilemma which is not yet resolved. [[Return to Text](#)]
13. See "De la question des termes à la querelle des rites de Chine: le dossier Foucquet de 1711," in *Neu Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*. XIV, 1958, p. 179. [[Return to Text](#)]
14. For a discussion of these issues, see Paul Rule, "Towards a History of the Chinese Rites Controversy," in D.E. Mungello, ed., *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning*. Nettetal (Steiner Verlag), Monumenta Serica Monograph Series, XXXIII, 1995, pp. 249–66. [[Return to Text](#)]
15. *History of the Popes*. Vol.33, ET 1941, p. 349, n.1. [[Return to Text](#)]
16. See Barry Martinson, *Celestial Dragon: A Life and Selected Writings of Fr. Francis Rouleau*. Taipei: Taipei Ricci Institute, 1998. [[Return to Text](#)]
17. Michel de Certeau, "Making History and Problems of Meaning," in *The Writing of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, pp. 19–55. [[Return to Text](#)]
18. We have noted with some dismay the number of apparently important items that have appeared in sale catalogues of auction houses and dealers and not resurfaced. [[Return to Text](#)]