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* 'Asia Pacific region' as used here includes East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Oceania, and the Russian Far East.
The Anti-Christian Campaign and Imperial Control in Eighteenth-Century China
by Ma, Zhao

Abstract
This article looks at the anti-Christian campaign in 1784-1785 within the wider contexts of political culture and bureaucratic reform in China during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor. It argues that Qianlong exploited the anti-Christian campaign to reinvigorate his ruling machine and to enforce his control over the imperial bureaucracy. The significance of this campaign lies not only in the light that it throws on the interactions between the Chinese imperial state and Catholic communities in the eighteenth century, but also in the ways in which the state continued to work out new mechanisms in response to problems facing the upper and lower levels of government.

By looking at the anti-Christian campaign (1784–1785), this study explores the dynamics of imperial control in eighteenth-century China. More than half a century ago, Bernward H. Willeke argued that the fear of foreigners drove the Qianlong Emperor (reign 1735–1796) to launch a two-month campaign against Catholic missionaries and Chinese converts across the empire (Willeke, 1948). Yet it remains unclear to us why Qianlong extended the campaign for another eighteen months, long after the missionaries were expelled from China. Drawing on unpublished materials at the First Historical Archives in Beijing, this research argues that the campaign was dictated by Qianlong’s agenda of “preserving peace and sustaining prosperity” (chijing baotai).

Qianlong saw the poor performance of the imperial officials in the course of the anti-Christian campaign as symptoms of bureaucratic demoralization and administrative deterioration. Underlying this view of governance was the idea that the state’s commitment to political stability and economic prosperity was closely linked to effective control over popular religious activities. As Philip A. Kuhn, Jane Kate Leonard, John Watt and Robert J. Anthony point out, the Qing government performed a mix of financial, security, and ideological functions. Put together, these functions defined the government’s strategic agendas. The maintenance of political and social stability was the top priority over other issues (Kuhn, 1990, 30–48; Leonard and Watt, 1992, 1–7; Antony and Leonard, 2002, 1–26). While the bureaucratic power of the imperial government was thinly spread across the empire, Qianlong was concerned about the fact that the country would be jeopardized in the long run by incompetent officials. Viewed from this perspective, Qianlong exploited the anti-Christian campaign to reinvigorate the government institutions and to enforce his control over the bureaucracy. The significance of this study lies not only in the light that it throws on the interactions between the imperial state and Catholic communities in eighteenth-century China, but also in the ways in which the state responded to problems facing the upper and lower levels of government.

I. The Anti-Christian Campaign
On the evening of the twenty-seventh day of the eighth lunar month of a small boat carrying four Italian Franciscan missionaries arrived at Baijia Wan near the borders of Hubei and Shaanxi provinces. A quarrel broke out suddenly between the boatmen and people on the shore. An assistant brigade commander (shoubei) and his soldiers passed by this scene during their routine inspection. When the soldiers approached, people involved in the quarrel ran away. The soldiers were surprised to find four Italian Franciscan missionaries on the boat (Willeke, 1948, 22). These missionaries were sent from Macao to look after the Catholic communities in Shaanxi province, but they were arrested on the way.1

The four missionaries were immediately taken to Wuchang, the provincial capital of Hubei. The officials failed to extract any information from them because the missionaries could not say a word in Chinese except “China,” “Beijing,” “Christianity” and “we cannot understand Chinese.”2 The language barrier made them look suspicious in the light of the current political climate in China. Three months before the arrival of the missionaries, a Muslim uprising broke out in Gansu province and spread to neighboring Shaanxi province. Though the uprising was suppressed and most of its leaders were executed, the imperial government continued to search for fugitive rebels, believing that some rebels hid themselves in the mountainous terrain along the provincial borders. That the missionaries were found in Hubei province, a region adjacent to Shaanxi, seemed to be a coincidence, but Qianlong and the governor-generals suspected that “as soon as the Westerners learned about the uprising, they had sent these missionaries to establish contacts and exchange intelligence with the Muslim rebels.”3 This security concern reveals a sense of crisis that preoccupied the minds of Qianlong and his senior officials (Willeke, 1948, 166).

It is hard to know whether Qianlong and his senior officials understood the doctrinal, ritual and institutional differences between Islam and Catholicism. The archival materials reveal the Chinese officials’ biases towards these two religions. The officials disparaged Islam and Catholicism because none of them were native Chinese teachings like Daoism and Confucianism. Both religions were propagated and practiced either by foreigners (European missionaries and merchants) or among the non-Han Chinese (Muslims). By comparison, Islam was considered to be more politically subversive than Catholicism because there had been three major Muslim uprisings in the eighteenth century: the Da Xiao Hezhuo rebellion in Xinjiang (1756–1760), the Su Sishisan uprising in Gansu (1781–1783), and the Tianwu uprising in Gansu and Shaanxi (1784) (Lipman, 1998). After all, the Kangxi Emperor (reign 1662–1722) banned Catholicism as a heterodox religion because of the Rites Controversy and most of the missionaries were expelled from China in the late seventeenth century.

Despite the lack of evidence, the investigation of the four missionaries continued. The officials discovered a Chinese
letter in the missionaries’ luggage and found several Chinese Catholics’ names and their addresses. They immediately went to look for these Catholics. Amongst those arrested, some people had provided the missionaries with food and lodgings and acted as their travel guides. Through interrogations, officials learnt about the background and reasons for the missionaries’ visit to China. It was reported that in Xi’an, the provincial capital of Shaanxi, some Chinese Catholics had bought several houses from a retired district magistrate in 1782 for constructing a church. After the church construction in April 1784, two of the converts went to Guangdong province to ask the missionaries to visit the Catholic community. In Guangzhou, they met the Chinese priest Peter Cai. In 1782, the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda in Rome sent twelve missionaries to Macao. After their arrival at Guangzhou in early 1784, the missionaries stayed with Francesco Giuseppe della Torre, a missionary of the Congregation of St. John the Baptist and known to the Chinese as “Duo Luo” or “Luo Ma Dang Jia”, who was in charge of the correspondence between the European missionaries at the imperial court in Beijing and the Vatican in Rome (Willeke, 1948, 19–20). At the request of the two Chinese converts, Francesco Giuseppe della Torre and Peter Cai agreed to send four Italian Franciscan missionaries to Shaanxi province. When the Chinese officials sought to search for other people involved in the Catholic mission, another incident took place in Shaanxi and drove this campaign to its climax. Bi Yuan, the provincial governor, successfully captured the Chinese Catholics who rebuilt the church and invited the foreign missionaries to visit the area. After arresting two Chinese Catholic merchants in Hunan province, Bi Yuan ended the investigation. Qianlong suspected that more foreigners were hiding in Shaanxi and ordered Bi Yuan to conduct another investigation. Bi Yuan arrested Bishop Magni, an Italian missionary living in Shaanxi for twenty years, during the second investigation. Magni confessed that Francesco Giuseppe della Torre had sent ten missionaries to different provinces in China. For the first time, Qianlong and his senior governors learnt about the Catholic Church hierarchy with several Chinese appointed as “bishops” and “priests.” Qianlong was alarmed by this extensive Catholic nationwide network and called for more arrests of foreign missionaries and Chinese Catholics. Within ten months, the government arrested nineteen foreign missionaries, several hundred Chinese priests, lay leaders and converts in sixteen provinces. Most of the missionaries were later released and expelled from China. The Chinese Catholic leaders were exiled to the frontiers and the ordinary converts were forced to abandon their religion.

II. “Preserving Peace and Sustaining Prosperity”

Given the small numbers of foreign missionaries and Chinese Catholics, why did Qianlong launch the nationwide anti-Catholic campaign? The answer lies in the change of political climate during the last few decades of Qianlong’s reign. Qianlong’s reign was characterized by territorial expansion, rapid economic development and population growth. When reflecting on his accomplishments in 1780,

Qianlong wrote,

“I will be in my seventies from this year on. … If the empire under my rulership has not achieved prosperity (quansheng), the people should at least be well off (xiaokang). My rule is popular, our territory is expanded, the imperial power is widely recognized and my subjects are enjoying their lives. Previous dynasties were troubled by warlords, foreign aggressors, powerful vassals, imperial matrilineal kinsmen, eunuchs, treacherous officials… Today we see no sign of these problems… My achievement is truly remarkable.”

Qianlong maintained a strict control over the imperial bureaucracy. From a reading of his correspondence with the provincial officials throughout the anti-Christian campaign, one gains an impression that the imperial bureaucracy still operated in an efficient manner. On October 8, 1784 (Qianlong 49.8.24), Qianlong sent an edict to Techeng’e, the Governor-General of Huguang, and ordered him to arrest two Catholics there. Upon receiving the edict on October 15 (Qianlong 49.9.2), Techeng’e reported to Qianlong three days later that he had captured one of the Catholics. Eight days later, on October 26 (Qianlong 49.9.13), Qianlong received another report and issued another edict to Techeng’e on the same day. No matter how far away the provincial capitals were from Beijing, the provincial officials had to respond to the imperial edict in less than three days. However, Qianlong was not satisfied with the overall performance of the provincial officials in the campaign and identified a number of administrative problems in the imperial bureaucracy.

The first problem was the erosion of imperial authority in the countryside. To effectively control the vast empire, Qianlong created a complex surveillance system at all levels. Missionaries entering China were subject to the surveillance of the Hong merchants in Guangzhou. As with the majority of the population, Chinese Catholics were put under the mutual surveillance system (baojia) (Hua, 1988). The baojia system, however, failed to control the activities of the missionaries. Prior to the anti-Christian campaign, Francesco Giuseppe della Torre housed several foreign missionaries in Guangzhou. The Chinese Catholics from Xi’an traveled with the Italian Franciscan missionaries across half of China before they were arrested. This extensive Catholic networks indicated a lack of state control in the countryside.

The other administrative problem was the inefficiency of the provincial governors in arresting the Catholic missionaries and the key Chinese converts. Throughout the anti-Christian campaign, Qianlong had to put pressure on the governors. In late 1784, Qianlong ordered Mingxing, the provincial governor of Shandong, to arrest two foreign missionaries in that province. After the first two months of the investigation, Mingxing arrested a handful Chinese Catholics and did not find any missionaries. Qianlong criticized Mingxing for his failure to find the foreigners and ordered him to conduct another investigation. Under the imperial pressure, in early 1785, Mingxing arrested Bishop Atto Biagini and Bishop Crescenziano Cavalli, both hiding at the home of the local Chinese converts. On another occasion, Qianlong ordered Yade, the provincial governor of Fujian, to arrest Peter Cai who allegedly arranged the Franciscan missionaries to travel to the interior. After many
months of investigation, Yade captured another foreign missionary but failed to find Peter Cai, who had fled to Macao in September 1784 and gone to India (Willeke, 1948, 26).

Similar problems appear to have prevailed on lower levels of the administrative apparatus. Qianlong never trusted the yamen runners and continuously warned the provincial governors to beware of these sub-district officials who helped the Catholic missionaries and Chinese converts to escape. Because of the administrative problems, Qianlong decided to exploit the anti-Christian campaign to reinvigorate the government institutions. The more aggressive the campaign, the more promising outcomes it would yield.

III. Conclusion
At the beginning of the anti-Christian campaign in 1784, the Qianlong Emperor was worried that the European missionaries had come to support the Muslim rebels in western parts of China. Though there was no connection between the Catholic movement and Muslim rebellions, Qianlong was surprised to discover an extensive Catholic network across the inland provinces. What worried him most was the utter failure of the imperial officials to police and control the Catholic communities. He was worried that these incompetent officials could jeopardize the Manchu Empire in the long run. Because of this concern, the anti-Christian campaign quickly evolved into a war against the imperial bureaucracy, and those officials who failed to capture any Catholic missionaries and Chinese converts were severely punished. Only by situating the anti-Christian campaign in the wider context of imperial politics can we understand the complexity of church-state relations in eighteenth-century China.

ENDNOTES
1. Zhupi zouzhe [Imperial Palace Memorials] (hereafter ZPZZ), First Historical Archives of China, Beijing, Doc. No. 9258–038, QL 49.8.9 (Emperor Qianlong Year. Month. Day). The missionaries were Giovanni da Sassari, Giuseppe Mattei da Bientina, Luigi Landi da Signa and Giovanni Battista da Mandello, see Willeke, 1948, 22.
3. Qianlong Shangyu dang [The Imperial Edicts of Qianlong] (hereafter QLSY), First Historical Archives of China, Beijing, Doc. No. 703, QL 49.8.2.
4. These Muslim rebellions were named after their leaders in the Qing official documents. For details about the Muslim rebellions in eighteenth-century China, see Lipman, 1998.

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