

## On the Chinese Rites Controversy Between China and the West

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### Abstract

The Chinese Rites Controversy was a significant historical event on the relations between China and the West during the period from the seventeenth to eighteenth century. At first, it was only an internal dispute between the Catholic missionaries in China, yet it finally evolved into a dispute between the Qing government and Vatican. Thus, the relationship between Qing government and Vatican and even the whole western world reversed sharply.

**Key words:** Catholic missionaries; Chinese rites controversy; Cultural communication

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### INTRODUCTION

The original cause of the Chinese Rites Controversy was just a simple dispute on the translation of a word, i. e. what Chinese word should be used for the word “Deus” in Christianity. Michel Ruggieri translated “Deus” into the Chinese word “tianzhu” or “shangdi”. Matteo Ricci succeeded his translation. From the view of linking Catholicism with Confucianity, Matteo Ricci thought the translation was felicitous, for the two concepts were Chinese traditional ones. In addition, the Catholic missionaries disputed on the worship paid to ancestor and Confucius by Chinese people. They disputed on whether the two Chinese rites would belong to religionary ritual. These two questions seemed simple, but as a matter of

fact, they represented the Catholic missionaries were questioning Chinese culture in the background of their own culture, or say they were surveying the religious character in Chinese culture with their own Christian concepts.

### 1. ORIGINAL CAUSE OF THE CHINESE RITES CONTROVERSY

Matteo Ricci reckoned that ancestor worship and worship to Confucius were not religion activities but important traditions in Chinese culture. He said in his book *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas*:

On the first day of every month and the days when the moon was round, Chinese local officials and scholars will come to Confucius Temple to salute to Confucius and they burn candles and cense in a big censer. On the birthday of Confucius and some festivals, they will perform a ceremonious ceremony, dedicating animals and other food to pay their thankfulness to Confucius for his great theory. They do not pray or ask for anything from Confucius. They do this just like to pay worship to their ancestors. They do not order people to believe anything. Besides Confucianism, they also believe in other two religions (Buddhism and Taoism). So we can believe Confucianism is not a formal religion but a school, which is set for the object of managing families and the country. The Chinese people can belong to this school while become a Christian. It will not violate any basic rules of Catholicism in principle. (Matteo & Nicolas, 1983)

Matteo Ricci’s comprehension laid a foundation for Catholicism to develop in Chinese scholar (Han, 2004). That was why Matteo Ricci could absorb high-level intellectuals, like Xu Guangqi, Yang Tingyun and Li Zhizao.

Not long after Matteo Ricci’s death, a dispute had occurred in the Jesuits. The successor selected by Matteo Ricci himself, Nicolas Longobardi took the leading position to oppose Matteo Ricci’s viewpoint. The cause of the event was that at the time Francois Noel, the principal

of Jesuits in the Far East, received a report from Jesuits in Japan. It was said in the report that many Japanese reckoned that there were some questions on Matteo Ricci's explanation of the words "tianzhu" and "shangdi". They thought the two concepts in Chinese culture were not the same as Deus in Christianity. Francois Noel wrote a letter to Nicolas Longobardi and ordered him to investigate the event. Nicolas Longobardi reported to Francois Noel together with Sabbathinus de Ursis, opposing to Matteo Ricci's explanation. They requested to forbid the use of the two concepts, "tianzhu" and "shangdi" in China deanery and Japan deanery, and to forbid the Christians to pay worship to ancestors and Confucius. But many Jesuits still stood on the side of Matteo Ricci. When Francois Noel asked Didace de Pantoja and Alphonsus Vagnoni for their view to the event, they all supported Matteo Ricci. In 1612, Jesuits hold a special conference in Macao to discuss the matter and a decision was made in the conference, which was to execute Matteo Ricci's route continually. But Nicolas Longobardi would not step aside and wrote a book to rebut Matteo Ricci's views. Alphonsus Vagnoni answered back immediately. The dispute went on. Jesuits had to hold a second conference in 1628 in Jiading Zhejiang to discuss the event. The result was that both parts compromised. They decided to execute Matteo Ricci's route on the matter of paying worship to ancestors and Confucius while on the event of the translation of Deus, they would take the suggestion of Nicolas Longobardi.

## 2. DISPUTES AMONG DIFFERENT IDEAS OF CATHOLICISM

When the dispute within Jesuits continued, Dominicans and Franciscans in China joined the dispute. Dominican Juan Mwrals sent a letter directly to the Pontifex in Rome in which he expressed his own views to the matter of paying worship to ancestors and Confucius. Dominicans were missionizing in Fujian. What they saw was the Chinese folk belief, which was totally different from what Matteo Ricci saw, for Matteo Ricci generally contacted with Chinese upper class intellectuals. Thus it was impossible for Dominicans to understand the difference between the big tradition (i. e. the culture represented by the upper class esquires and intellectuals in cities) and the small tradition (i. e. the culture represented by farmers and in village) in Chinese culture. Because Dominicans had a much higher position than Jesuits in explaining Catholic theology in Rome, the Roman Curia agreed to Juan Mwrals' opinion at last. Pontifex Inocen X issued an order to forbid Chinese Christians to pay worship to ancestors and Confucius.

All Jesuits in China acknowledged clearly what the forbidden order from Rome meant. If the order was executed, all Jesuits' efforts since Matteo Ricci would

be ruined totally. Thereupon, Jesuits in China sent Martin Martini back to Europe in a hurry to state the standpoint of Jesuits in China to the Roman Curia and ask for Permission to withdraw the forbidden order in 1643. Martin Martini tried his best to persuade Pontifex Alexander VII to support Jesuits. In 1656, the Pontifex authorized Chinese followers to attend the ceremonies to pay worship to ancestors and Confucius. The Pontifex said: "In Confucius Temple, there was no idolatry or celebrant, Chinese scholars came there just to express thanks to Confucius as their teacher, and the rite was just a folk custom and a political event." (Chen, 1932)

The Pontifexes in Rome changed one by one and the policies changed rapidly. The two incompatible documents put the missionaries in China in quandary. Dominicans wrote a letter to the Roman Curia to ask which order should be executed. Answer from Roman Curia in 1669 was both were in effect and the later would not negate the former.

At the time, the Catholic missionaries in China were in the difficult time of "Calendar Lawsuit". Most of them were mustered in Guangzhou. They had a conference there for forty days and concluded a resolution to execute the order in 1656 issued by Alexander VII. That meant Jesuits had a success. But before long, Charles Maigrot, the bishop in Fujian dispatched directly by the Roman Curia, raised another dispute again. He ordered all churches in Fujian Province to take down the stele with the Chinese word jing tian (respect the Heaven) inscribed by Emperor Kangti, and forbade Chinese followers to pay worship to ancestors and Confucius.

In the thirty-ninth year of Kangxi Period (1700), the Jesuits in palace Philippe Marie Grimaldi, Tomas Pereria, Jean François Gerbillon and Antoine Thomas wrote a very dutiful letter to Emperor Kangxi to express their views to the Chinese Rites. They said in the letter:

We believe that paying worship to Confucius as a model is not for the purpose of asking for bliss or gain. To set stele for ancestors is for the purpose of commemorating them by off springs. Paying worship to the heaven is just to pay worship to "shangdi" who controlled everything on earth according to Confucianism. Sometimes, "shangdi" is referred as "tian" (heaven). Though the names are different, but the meaning of them is the same. The stele "jing tian" (respect the heaven), honored to us by the Emperor is to express the meaning. (Li, 1998)

After reading this letter, Emperor Kangxi instructed: "What they said in the letter was good and in accordance with major principles. Paying worship to heaven, ancestors and Confucius was the true principle that can't be changed." (Ibid.)

Jesuits got the permission from the Chinese emperor and then they began to persuade the Roman Curia. In 1703, Jesuits sent François Noel and Gaspard Kastner to Rome to state position of Jesuits in China to the new Pontifex, Clement XI. Jesuits prepared well this time; they brought certificates written by the Chinese followers in various deaneries. In the certificates, the followers

explained the signification of paying worship to ancestors and Confucius and how they understand the concepts of “tianzhu” and “shangdi”. Each certificate was signed personally by the Chinese followers and was translated into Latin by Jesuits. At the time, Artus de Lyonne, who was a missionary from Paris Foreign Missions came to Rome, too. So they had a drastic controversy.

In 1704, the Pontifex and the Roman Curia executed an arbitrament once again:

“Tianzhu” should be used for addressing God, not “tian” and “shangdi”; the stele with the words “jing tian” should be taken down from churches; Chinese Christians should not enter Confucius Temple or ancestral temples and should not participate in any activity related to paying worship to ancestors and Confucius. (Chen, 1932)

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### 3. DELEGATION BY CARLO TOMMASO COMING TO CHINA

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In 1704, after the Roman Curia judged “Chinese Rites” as heresy, in order to express its position to the Chinese emperor, the Roman Curia sent Carlo Tommaso to China. Thus, the dispute among different orders of Catholicism in China ceased for a while. A Pure cultural problem evolved into a problem between the Qing government and Vatican.

In April 1705, the delegation by Carlo Tommaso arrived in Macao and entered Guangzhou later. In July, Jesuits in the royal palace reported the arrival of Carlo Tommaso to Emperor Kangxi formally. Emperor Kangxi ordered the governor of Guangdong to receive the delegation and sent Jean François Gerbillon and other missionaries to Tianjin to await the arrival of the delegation. In September, Carlo Tommaso boarded a ship from Guangzhou to Beijing, but before departure, he was seized with apoplexy and became hemiplegia. Emperor Kangxi had not gotten information about Carlo Tommaso for months and was very worried. He thought it was too slow by waterway, so he sent a prince to Linqing, Shandong to await Carlo Tommaso and escort him to Beijing by landway. From emperor Kangxi’s mood we could see that he put much hope on Carlo Tommaso’s coming to China.

After arriving in Beijing, Carlo Tommaso was settled in the Northern Cathedral. In December 1705, Emperor Kangxi interviewed with Carlo Tommaso warmly. During the interview, Emperor Kangxi asked about the attitude of the Roman Curia to “Chinese Rites” and Carlo Tommaso dared not answer the emperor’s questions directly. In June 1706, Emperor Kangxi interviewed with Carlo Tommaso for the second time. Carlo Tommaso still prevaricated and just told the emperor that he was sent to China by the Pontifex to pay respects to the Chinese emperor. Emperor Kangxi told Carlo Tommaso clearly that Confucianism had been pursued for thousands years in China, if missionaries in China opposed to “Chinese Rites”, it must

be impossible for them to stay in China any longer. Carlo Tommaso had nothing to say and had to tell the Emperor apriest who was familiar with Chinese affairs would come to Beijing in the near future. The priest Carlo Tommaso mentioned was Charles Maigrot.

In August 1706, Emperor Kangxi interviewed with Charles Maigrot in his Summer Resort in Chengde. Charles Maigrot spoke in the dialect of Fujian and Dominique Parrenin had to be his interpreter. When Emperor Kangxi asked him how to read the four Chinese characters behind the imperial seat, Charles Maigrot could read only one of them. Emperor Kangxi was deeply annoyed and said:

Charles Maigrot can’t read Chinese characters, and how could he talk about Chinese affairs? When he talked about Chinese culture, it was just like a man standing outside of the house talking about the affairs occurring in the house. What he said must be nonsense. (Claudia, 1994)

After interview with Charles Maigrot, Emperor Kangxi disliked Carlo Tommaso, too. When Carlo Tommaso asked for leaving Beijing, the emperor permitted at once.

When Carlo Tommaso arrived in Nanjing, Emperor Kangxi ordered to drive Charles Maigrot and his assistant, together with Mezzaface, the bishop in Zhejiang, out of China. He also ordered to drive Carlo Tommaso’s assistant Luigi Antonio to his original missionizing place—Sichuan. At the same time, all missionaries in China were ordered to state that they would obey the policy set by Matteo Ricci. In December 1706, Emperor Kangxi issued an order that all missionaries in China must get the license issued by the court and agree to “ChineseRites”; otherwise they could not missionize in china. A month later, Carlo Tommaso announced the ban of the Roman Curia in Nanjing.

As a matter of fact, Emperor Kangxi did not intend to make a thorough break with the Roman Curia at that time. He thought the cause for the Roman Curia to make such a decision was just because of persons like Charles Maigrot. So Emperor Kangxi sent missionaries back to Europe to state his attitude to the Roman Curia twice. But four missionaries he sent did not accomplish the mission, so Emperor Kangxi had not known whether the Roman Curia had changed its opinion for a long time.

Jesuits in China relayed Emperor Kangxi’s opinion of the Roman Curia, hoping there would be some changes of the arbitrament in 1704. But Clement XI not only restated the order in 1704 was still effective, but also issued a new order that all people who did not absolutely execute the order in 1704 would be anathematized.

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### 4. ENVOY CARLO MEZZABARBA COMING TO CHINA

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In 1720, the Roman Curia sent another envoy, Carlo Mezzabarba to China again. When Carlo Mezzabarba

arrived at the outskirts of Beijing, Emperor Kangxi sent an official to ask the assignment of his visit. Carlo Mezzabarba answered directly: "One thing is to ask for the Chinese emperor's permission to manage western missionaries in China; the other thing is to ask the emperor to allow Chinese Christians to execute the order issued last year by the Pontifex." (Chen, 1932) Emperor Kangxi instructed directly, too:

I will permit the two things your Pontifex asked for, but your Pontifex's order is incompatible with Chinese principles. Catholicism must be banned in China. All the western missionaries in China, except those who are versed in science and technology or too old to go back, should be taken back to the West. (Ibid.)

Kangxi's words meant all the efforts of the Catholic missionaries in China in several decades would be ruined totally. Thus, Jesuits in Beijing began to discuss with Carlo Mezzabarba, intending to find out a compromise to harmonize the order of Roman Curia with Emperor Kangxi's request. Jesuits concluded several methods, such as permitting Chinese Christians to pay worship to ancestors at home, but on the side of the memorial tablet should note the principle of respecting parents in Catholicism. But the painstaking of Jesuits did not bring their prospective goal.

When Emperor Kangxi interviewed with Carlo Mezzabarba at first, he asked him about the characters with wings in western pictures and Carlo Mezzabarba explained in detail. Then, Emperor Kangxi said: "We Chinese do not understand western words so we cannot remark on western affairs. You westerners do not understand Chinese words, how can you remark on Chinese affairs?" (Ibid.) Under Carlo Mezzabarba's persistence, the ban of the Pontifex was translated into Chinese and read to Emperor Kangxi. Then Emperor Kangxi understood the intention of the Roman Curia and he instructed, "how can such person understand Chinese principle? What they said about Chinese affairs is absurd.

Catholicism should be banned in China later." (Ibid.) Carlo Mezzabarba was sent out of China courteously. Thus, the first diplomacy between China and the Roman Curia ended with divarication.

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## CONCLUSION

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The Chinese Rites Controversy was an important event in the history of cultural communication between China and the West. From this event, we can find the problem of Catholicism when it faced Chinese culture. Whether the orders of Catholicism that were against Matteo Ricci's policy, such as Paris Foreign Missions represented by Charles Maigrot, Dominicans and Franciscans, or the Roman Curia represented by Carlo Tommaso and Carlo Mezzabarba, had intended to cut out other culture with the standard of western culture. It was from the time of the Chinese Rites Controversy that Christianity stopped its way to melt into Chinese culture. At the same time, China lost the bridge to contact with western world gradually.

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