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China's Century and the West in History: Historical Research in China on the Early Modern Era

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MEMS TALK – WHITWORTH UNIVERSITY
(Skype Lecture from China) 23 October 2012, 7:00-8:00 pm

LECTURE TITLE:

“China’s Century and the West in History: Historical Research in China on the Early Modern Era”

PRESENTER:

Dr. Anthony E. Clark, Associate Professor of Chinese History (Whitworth University)

Talk Outline:

- I. Greetings from the Middle Kingdom – hello Spokane!
 - a. Thank you to Prof. Slack for arranging this, and to my colleagues in MEMs who agreed that a talk about China’s early modern history is as interesting as Monty Python.
 - b. If you have a question – please raise your hand and wave it around, so our happy satellite can convey your movements to me here in Beijing.
 - i. Be patient if we have technical difficulty – just over a century ago making a phone call across a neighborhood was something of a miracle; what we’re doing right now would have been unimaginable science fiction!
- II. I’d like to begin with something that may seem slightly off-topic – the board game Monopoly!
 - a. I’ve played Monopoly several hundred times and only recall losing one game – I have a very simple strategy.

- i. I silently buy everything I land on (if I have the money) – anything!
- b. Generally, after 30-40 minutes people begin to notice that they spend all their money paying me rent – I then buy houses and hotels, and slowly watch my fellow players mortgage whatever they have to pay me rent.
 - i. I really do get a twisted sense of victory watching others go to herculean efforts to pay me – I should probably go to Confession for this little flaw!
- c. I'm not an economist, and I haven't studied business, but I seem to have intuitively landed on an interesting strategy – this is actually China's strategy!
 - i. China is very silently buying massive amounts of US and other countries' debts, companies, properties, and labor contracts.
 - ii. Now most of the world is landing on "China's Monopoly properties," and the early-modern Sino-Western trade-imbalance of the nineteenth century is being repeated.

III. Let me give you a few real examples of what I mean – all from recent newspaper features in the last several weeks here in China.

- a. In July China increased its holdings of US debt by 2.6 billion USD, so now Japan and China (Asia) own most of the US debt.
- b. Recently, China's second most wealthy person bought AMC movie theaters, the second largest entertainment chain in America.
 - i. So, sour movies and popcorn money is building China's economy.
 - ii. What's more "American" than going to the movies?

- c. Another wealthy Chinese businessman just purchased a European bank – the first time in history that a Western country’s bank is owned by a private individual – no less an individual from an Asian country.

IV. Napoleon Bonaparte once said: “Let China sleep. For when China wakes, it will shake the world.”

- a. China, with its 1.4 billion people, are waking up, and as it rolls out of bed the rest of the world is now beginning to feel its tremors.
- b. Let me recommend a book:
 - i. Jonathon Watts, *When a Billion Chinese Jump: How China Will Save Mankind – Or Destroy It* (2010)

V. So, what does this all have to do with the early modern era?

- a. We historians are fond of repeating George Santayana’s famous quip:
“Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it.”
 - i. Said another way – **Those who remember the past are likely to improve the future!**
- b. I’ll center on three aspects of my research here in China:
 - i. Why am I here?
 - ii. What am I doing here?
 - iii. And how am I doing it?
 - 1. I’ll try to include some specific examples of what my research is yielding.

VI. So, **why** am I here?

- a. Western historians cannot help but see the footsteps of Christianity in the

long history of the West:

- i. Churches, universities, architectural styles, intellectual trends, ethics, and so forth.
- b. One of the principal goals of my research and publication is to demonstrate that the early modern, and thus modern, history of China has been principally changed by these same Christian influences.
 - i. China's relationship with the West has been one of both friendship and antagonism – either way, Christian missionaries were the most present and instrumental Westerners in China during the early modern era.
 - ii. This is significant because when Chinese historians imagine Sino-Western history, they imagine it more as Sino-missionary history.
- c. So, I am here to study and write about the most significant factor of Sino-Western history, which will help us all to better understand China's current decisions regarding its interactions with Western countries, including the United States.
 - i. If we are serious about the history of Western society we must acknowledge the impact of Max Weber's, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.
 - ii. Weber's Christian-based ideas fueled America's economic behavior, and now they are fuelling China's economic behavior.
 1. Remember Weber as I continue my talk.
- d. In short, my research seeks to better understand China's long relationship

with the West's foundational religious view.

- e. If this is, as the Western media often affirms, "China's Century," then the larger question that needs to be answered is, how much of China's current growth results from its borrowing from such Western Christian ideas as Max Weber's "Protestant ethic"?

VII. To answer the question of **what** I am doing here is very simple: I am spending around 9-11 hours per day working on a scholarly book, which I hope will be finished by the summer, and under review at an academic press next year.

- a. My book is on the early modern history of Franciscan nuns and friars, and their relationship with local Chinese women and men, in China's Shanxi province around the Boxer era (late-nineteenth century).

- b. And the title of my book is: *Friars, Fairies, and the War of Immortals: China's Heavenly Battle on the Earthly Plains of Shanxi.*

VIII. Having formulated **why** and **what** I am in China to do, the next mechanical question is . . . **how** is this best accomplished?!

- a. My research here this year actually began last academic year during Jan-Term, while I was in Rome collecting materials from the Vatican, Jesuit, and Franciscan archives.

- i. These important missionary records about China will help to understand the Western missionary view of China during the early modern era.

- b. To answer how I am proceeding with my work here in China – I spend my evenings working through French, Italian, Latin, and Chinese texts (I need

a bit of help with the Italian and Latin), and I identify specific passages related to what I see as – “modes of (mis)representation.”

- i. That is, how did the missionaries imagine and re-present the native Chinese during the late-nineteenth century?
 - ii. And, how did the local Chinese (non-Christian) imagine and re-present both Western missionaries and native Christians during that period?
- c. I then spend my mornings at the Sino-Western Anton Chinese Studies Library at the Business and Trade University here in Beijing.
- i. While my mind is most fresh I write the narrative of my book, which is divided into sections that present the Chinese and Western impressions, respectively.
- d. The challenge for any honest and ethical scholar is to allow the materials to speak for themselves: as my academic mentor constantly advised me, “Reveal what your sources reveal without distortion, as much as humanly possible.”

IX. Let me outline some of what I have learned so far:

a. Local Chinese views of Western missionaries and native Christians:

- i. In Shanxi, most of what was written about missionaries and Christianity was written by the local Confucian literatus, **Liu Dapeng** (1857-1943) – so far, none of his writings have been translated into English, so I have also needed to translate some of his more relevant passages.

ii. The second group of texts I am working through includes both local **edicts by the governor of Shanxi** and the copious **placards disseminated by Boxers** in 1900.

1. [If you're not familiar with the Boxer eat history – take my class.]

iii. Let me start with something that was published in China nearly four decades before the era my book is concerned with, the vitriolic text and illustrations of the *Bixiejishi* (A Record of Facts to Ward Off Heterodoxy), published in 1861.

1. One of the illustrations in this text, which encouraged severe forms of anti-foreignism, depicted an, “Image of Feeding [Foreigners] Shit,” 齊團灌糞圖.

2. Another depicted a Chinese person reclining on a bed while two European priests gouge out the Chinese person's eyes; the title of this caption reads: “Image of the pig grunt [homophone for Catholic] religionists cutting out eyes” 豬叫「主教」剜眼圖.

a. Excrement was considered an apotropaic substance in imperial China; forcing Christians to eat feces was thought to hinder their practice of “black magic.”

iv. So, by 1900 there were already some very inventive Chinese myths about Christians circulating around northern China.

v. The local Shanxi Confucian, Liu Dapeng, wrote texts that built upon earlier Chinese mythologies – I’ll give you two examples.

1. In a lengthy reflection on the “Christian practice of black magic,” 教民衡行邪術 Liu outlines a litany of imaginative practices.

a. Liu accuses Christians of performing rites involving the sprinkling of blood, 洒血 and steaming food in poisonous vapors, 蒸毒物食.

b. He also wrote that Christians enchanted China’s streets and alleys with a mysterious magical “kill, kill sound” 殺殺之聲.

i. If you heard this magical Christian sound you would go crazy and start killing people.

2. The most curious belief in Shanxi China about Christians in 1900 was that they could create paper men that would massacre Chinese natives.

3. Let me read you the passage:

其剪黃紙人夜放閭巷也，欲使億兆華人悉被其戕害，而義和拳傳諭各家，皆於屋扉窗櫺內置水盆以破之。

“[Christians] cut out paper men with yellow paper and past them in alleys and lanes in the night, desiring that these paper figures will massacre a million Chinese people. The Boxers, however, broadcasted instructions to every

household, informing them to set out water basins in their door thresholds and windowsills in order to destroy the paper men [as they fall into the water].”

a. So, Liu is here saying that Christians in China sprinkle magical blood to curse native Chinese, steam food with fatal vapors to poison them, cast a magical “kill, kill sound” curse that drives Chinese people mad, and make paper cut-out people that animate in the night to run through streets and lanes to massacre Chinese people.

i. But the Boxers, Liu states, have rescued people by advising households to set out water basins in doors and windows that the paper men will fall into and dissolve in the water.

b. I love reading weird things – as you can tell!

vi. Boxer placards were no less strange during China’s early modern era,

1. Two things were occupying the minds of Shanxi’s Chinese during the end of 1900: first were the terrible rumors of Christian “black magic” and foreign power; second was the terrible famine that struck the plains of northern China, which was leaving massive numbers of people dead.

- a. Sources describe roads covered in emaciated corpses of those who had starved to death.
- b. Boxer placards combined these two – here is an example:

神助拳。義和拳。只因鬼子鬧中原。勸奉教。自信天。不信神佛。忘祖先。
男無倫。女行姦。天無雨。弟焦乾。都是鬼子支住天。

“The gods help the fighters, the Boxers, as the foreign devils have disturbed the central plains. They force their religion and only believe in Heaven (viz., the Lord of Heaven). They don’t believe in the gods or the Buddha, and they neglect their ancestors. Their men are improper and their women immoral. . . . The heavens won’t rain and the earth is scorched, all because of the foreign devils the skies are blocked.”

2. In short, the drought and famine were caused because the Chinese gods were angry at the Christian God, and thus had deliberately blocked the sky to prevent rain.
- vii. Finally, what was the official answer to these local Chinese views of Western missionaries and native Christians, who were described as wicked magicians who were determined to invade and conquer China?
1. The governor of Shanxi, Yuxian (1842-1901), responded by issuing a series of official edicts that gave Christians a very serious ultimatum: apostatize or die.
 2. Here is an example of one of Yuxian’s edicts, issued on 5

July 1900:

義民焚殺，爾禍將臨

勸爾教民，及早自新

改邪歸正，莫不為仁

[...]

倘不知改，後悔無因

為此曉諭，各宜懍尊

“The righteous people will burn and kill, and calamities will come down.

I exhort you who are Christians to reform before it is too late.

Correct your evil and return to what is proper and all shall be benevolent.

[...]

For those who do know to change, they will have regrets for no reason.

To this end explicit directions are given, and all should revere [this decree] with terror.”

viii. China’s Christians in Shanxi had a simple decision to make in 1900: formally deny your faith and live, or the government will execute you.

1. Thousands of Shanxi’s Christians refused to apostatize and were killed.

a. One group of over 200 Christian men went to the official courtyard, pulled their shirts down to expose their necks, and welcomed the executioner to come and behead them.

- i. This was a very powerful gesture of Christian defiance.

b. Missionary views of China and the Chinese:

- i. Meanwhile, missionaries and Christians were forming their own impressions of the Chinese – some views were positive and some were less flattering.
- ii. The materials I have been consulting consist mostly of original letters by Franciscan nuns and friars in Shanxi just before and during the Boxer violence of 1900.
- iii. First, I should note that, as you would expect, there is not a single document in any country that I've visited to verify that the missionaries ever imagined, much less practiced, a kind of anti-Chinese magic.
 1. This was purely a Chinese invention intended to stir common Chinese against foreigners.
 2. In Shanxi, the Franciscan missionaries were most interested in imitating Saint Francis.
 - a. So, they lived very poor lives and practiced works of charity, such as operating an orphanage, hospital, and school.
- iv. But they did have impressions, and they did write them in their letters back to Europe:
- v. Let me take just a few examples from the letters of Sister Marie-

Hermine de Jesus, the Mother Superior of the convent in Shanxi.

1. Her reactions to China were very typical of Western missionaries who first arrived, which usually accuse the Chinese of having low standards of hygiene.

2. In 1899, Sr. Marie-Hermine wrote:

“Every day, ten or fifteen times we are forced to cross the courtyard of the orphanage. . . . And when we go out we see 150 to 200 children, scantily clad, filthy, and full of vermin – eating, fighting, or crawling in the mud just like puppies. . . . It is impossible to understand the benefits of working with such creatures, used to wandering around all day.”

- a. You can see both her sense of preeminence over a “less civilized” people, and even her sense of discouragement that their efforts are of no use.
3. And among the most provoking Chinese cultural practices to the Franciscan nuns involved the role and expectations of women: especially arranged marriage and footbinding.
 - a. In another letter, Sr. Marie-Hermine recalls a young girl who was sixteen who decided to become a nun.
 - i. The problem was that her parents had also arranged for her to marry.
 - ii. The girl’s parents and matchmakers pressed her, saying that her marriage was legally contracted.

iii. The girl remained determined to become a nun, so the situation became intense – Sr.

Marie-Hermine wrote about her in one letter:

“ ‘This is obstinacy,’ said the girl’s father who struck her with such fierceness that blood began to flow. But nothing could shake the girl’s resolve. The groom, having heard of this, came in person to ascertain the facts, and her father confessed that it was true, but promised to try and change the girl’s mind. After her parents tried again to change her decision, the girl, named Mary, loosened and removed her footbinding, cut off her hair, and threw the cloth and hair into a fire. The courageous girl shouted, ‘Now the boy won’t take me!’ . . . In their rage, her family trapped the poor girl’s feet again and sewed the strips onto her feet very tightly.”

iv. The ideas of forced marriage and forced footbinding were both concepts alien to the Catholic notion of free will, and so much of the impressions Western missionaries formed of Chinese culture responded negatively to China’s very strict expectations of women.

4. In their defense, the Chinese view of marriage is that most young people are not really wise enough to know who they **should** marry, but tend to choose who they **want** to marry based on very shallow criteria.

a. Also, in China it is not only two **people** who get

married in a marriage, but two **families**; thus to leave the families out of the decision process makes little sense.

5. Such cultural disagreements led to some rather unfortunate statements made out of exasperation, such as the common missionary assertion in Shanxi that the drought was, as they said, “a chastisement from God who wants to punish them for their wickedness.”
- vi. As a footnote to these antagonisms, Protestant missionaries commonly broadcasted that China’s religious beliefs were Satanic – they often wrote that Chinese temples contained demons that regularly possessed common Chinese people.
- vii. One missionary, John Livingston Nevius (1829-1893), considered the performance of exorcisms one of his primary roles in China, and wrote a rather interesting book called, *Demon Possession and Allied Themes*, published in 1897.
 1. In his book, Nevius writes about a Chinese man named “Mr. Kwo,” who was “suffering all sorts of inflictions from an evil spirit.”
 2. When Nevius at last met the possessed man, the Chinese peasant pointed to “the shrine where he worshipped the demon,” after which the missionary “told him the first thing to do was to tear away this shrine.”

3. The afflicted man was then taught about Jesus, given some Christian books, and exhorted to convert – then the “demon” would depart from him.

viii. To put this more plainly, while Chinese texts often accused Western missionaries of “black magic” and being part of an “evil foreign cult,” Western missionaries were themselves writing about China as a filthy and uncultured society, which was, as one missionary simply put it, “under the chokehold of the devil.”

X. I could continue with similar examples for hours, but should summarize: what does missionary “magic,” footbinding, hygiene, and demonic possession have to do with my opening comments about how to win at Monopoly or China’s recent purchase of even more US debt or the recent Chinese purchase of America’s movie theaters?

- a. All these very odd impressions that Chinese had about foreigners and Christianity and the Western views of Chinese society were not fringe; these were the mainstream beliefs each held about the other.
 - i. And I need not tell you how fictional many of these impressions were.
- b. When China began to form its foreign relations policies during the Maoist era, 1949-1976, it sadly formed its ideas based on distorted and aggressively anti-foreign ideas about the West.
 - i. The Boxers who spread these strange myths about foreign magic were immediately commemorated as proto-Communist

revolutionaries during the first years of the People's Republic of China, and the attitude of these myths – if not the perpetuation of some – became part of the bedrock of “how to deal with the West.”

c. And the question of China's economic policies, formed after Mao died in 1976, were largely based on an idea that was first developed during the Boxer era.

i. In response to Western military power, Chinese intellectuals formulated the idea that to compete with the West China must, “Consider Chinese studies as the essence, and consider Western studies as useful” 中學為體，西學為用.”

1. Put more simply, China's intellectuals held that, in their words, since the essence of Chinese civilization is superior to the West (that is China without Christianity), if Western science and economic theories are used, China will eventually dominate the West.

a. This is still a serious debate in China – after all, even the western idea of Marxism has been changed to now be called, “Socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

d. So, I'll end here with a bit of a provocation based on my current research on China's early modern history and how it helps us better understand what is happening today.

i. There are a growing number of Chinese today who believe that it is

not just Western science that has given it the edge in recent history, but they believe that the West's greatest advantage has been its Christianity – Max Weber, they think, was largely correct.

1. So, the number of Chinese Christians is growing exponentially, and many today suggest that to compete with the West China should rely on Christianity as the essence and Chinese culture as the useful – a complete reversal.
 - a. Not all agree with this theory, but I think it is gaining ground.
- e. Finally, some in China would argue that as the West loses its Christianity it also loses its edge, for then its ethic of hard work and moral discipline gives way . . . and then . . . as Napoleon suggested, China will continue to awake and “shake the world.”
- f. One of China's most famous thinkers of the early modern era was Hu Shi, who once wrote: “The Jesuits had learned that a Christian mission to China could never succeed if it were not in a position to show and convince the Chinese intelligentsia of the superiority of the European culture.”
 - i. Some today wonder if it is China that is today convincing the West of the “greatness of its own culture” – while the West seems to be forgetting. . . .

QUESTIONS?