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PAPER FOR THE AOS WESTERN BRANCH MEETING
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“China, Children, and the New Catechism: Jesuit Adaptation of *Ertong Wenxue*”

My paper today is more a report on a new research project than a description of research conclusions. My purpose is to venture into an area of consideration quite relevant to the present academic trend to explore East/West comparativism. But mostly I'd like to discuss a rather curious history in China-West interaction. As Zora Neale Hurston (1903-1960) has said, “Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.” So, I'll offer more questions than answers, for I agree with Will Durant (1885-1981) who wrote that, “Inquiry is fatal to certainty.”

The Jesuits first arrived in China in 1574 and set themselves to the tasks of learning the Chinese language and converting souls. As they mastered the native language they began slowly to collect Chinese works and write new ones of their own. They also began to send these old and new works back to Rome, where they were tenderly stored in Jesuit and Vatican archives. And by March 6, 1581, only seven years after Jesuit incursion into China, Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) visited the Vatican repositories and was enchanted by a book “in strange characters” written on what he described as oddly soft and absorbent paper.¹ As far as I know, this is the earliest record of someone consulting Chinese documents held in the Vatican's library. While perhaps not as famous as Montaigne, another

¹ Anthony Grafton, “The Vatican and its Library,” in *Rome Reborn*, ed. by Anthony Grafton (Yale University Press, 1993), 3.

scholar, one who is quite famous in China studies, Paul Pelliot, (1878-1945) paid a much later visit to the Chinese works of the Vatican.

Pelliot spent just over three short weeks, from June 13 to July 6, in the Pope's Library, the *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana*, where he astonishingly managed to catalog all of the Chinese documents kept in that collection. As Kyoto researcher, Takata Tokio, notes, the result is "by no means a systematic catalogue, but it reveals the profound erudition of the compiler."² In the end Pelliot had produced a typed inventory of the Papal Library's Chinese collection, but it contains no Chinese characters and there is only one copy of his original catalog in existence, kept in the department of manuscripts in the open stacks.³ In 1995, Takata Tokio published a revised and edited version of this catalog. This work includes the Chinese characters of the listed works and Pelliot's original French translations of the book titles. Since Pelliot's catalog only inventories works in the Pope's Library, a large number of additional documents related to China in the Vatican Secret Archives, the *Archivio Segreto Vaticano*, still remain unconsulted and out of scholarly view. Secret Archive texts mostly include documents related to the causes of sainthood for Catholic missionaries and converts during China's late-imperial era – official Church *processus* and *positio*. I should also note that so far the best précis on the Vatican's Chinese holdings is Howard Goodman's chapter in the work, *Rome Reborn: the Vatican Library and Renaissance Culture*, published in 1993.

² Paul Pelliot, *Inventaire Sommaire des Manuscrites et Imprimés Chinois de la Bibliothèque Vaticane*, rev. and ed. by Takata Tokio (Kyoto: Istituto Italiano di Cultura Scuola di Studi sull'Asia Orientale, 1995), xi.

³ Paul Pelliot, *Inventaire Sommaire des Manuscrites et Imprimés Chinois de la Bibliothèque Vaticane* (Vatican, typescript catalog, 1922).

There are several other Catholic archives that contain important collections of Chinese works, many of which were authored by missionaries to facilitate conversions or record missionary histories. One of the archives I consulted last year is the Jesuit Archives at Taibei, Taiwan. This repository holds a large number of documents related to Jesuit activities in China and Taiwan, including some very interesting records and photographs related to the Zhujiahe 朱家河 massacre during the Boxer Uprising. I have so far been unable to locate a single mention in any academic study of this slaughter of over 3,000 Catholics by Qing troops and Boxers in Hubei. I also consulted the archives of the Missions Étrangères de Paris in Paris, which holds an impressive number of missionary letters and handwritten Chinese books recording the histories of Catholic missions, including a large handwritten manuscript recording the martyrdoms of M. E. P. missionaries in Guizhou and Guiyang. As far as I know, these texts also have not yet been studied. There is also an excellent archive held in the Roman headquarters of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions. This collection houses records, photographs, and personal items involving their mission efforts in China, including objects related to several martyrs. My own research at these archives has centered on two primary areas: Catholic activities in China and Catholic strategies for converting Chinese natives. One of my objectives here, then, is to inspire others to begin work on this large body of uncharted history related to China.

So, one of my present projects is the collection, documentation, and translation of Catholic catechetical works from the seventeenth through twentieth centuries, and today I'll offer some preliminary remarks on one such text, the *Tianzhu shengjiao sizijingwen* 天主聖教四字經文 (The Sacred Teaching of the Lord of Heaven Four Character Classic).⁴ Before I

⁴ BAV, *Borgia Cinese*: 334, 26°.

discuss the contents of this work, I'd like to contextualize it into the framework of the native Chinese texts it emulates. Firstly, it fits nicely into the larger genre of *qimeng* 啟蒙 or *mengshu*, 蒙書 generally translated as “primers,” that expound elementary principles. Another term referring to these “primers” is *zisbu*, 字書 or “character books,” since these works most often appear as cleverly written rhyming books that facilitate the easy memorization of characters. In the context of China, these books were generally expected to teach children the fundamentals of reading and moral behavior. The most famous of these *qimeng* texts is the *Sanzijing* 三字經 (Three Character Classic) by Wang Yinglin 王應麟 (1223-1296), a work including 1,062 characters – 512 not counting repeated characters. Thus, a young reader would learn to recognize over 500 characters through studying this primer.

Primers were in fact among the most popularly sold books after the Song 宋 (960-1279); the three most popular being the *Sanzijing*, the *Baijiaxing* 百家姓 (One-hundred Surnames, anonymous ninth-century text), and the *Qianziwen* 千字文 (One-thousand Character Text, by Zhou Xingsi 周興嗣 [sixth century]). These works consisted usually of three, four, and five-word rhymed phrases that inculcated the readers with the cultural and literary allusions felt important to a young learner or adult beginner. In a sense, these primers socialized the readers into late-imperial Chinese society, centered as it was on Confucian tenets. Generally speaking, after the thirteenth century *qimeng* texts were placed in the category of *ertong wenxue*, 兒童文學 or “children’s literature.” But not all of these *qimeng* works were topically confined to children’s topics. Women were also expected to read character books, and as late as the twentieth century.

I recently procured a small butterfly-bound book at a Taiwan bookstall with five such primers stitched into a single volume. The book is dated in the owner's inscription to 1934, and includes the *Sanzijing*, *xishi xianwen* 昔時賢文 (Worthy Texts of Antiquity), *Shenglu qimeng* 聲律啟蒙 (Primer on Rhyme and Phonetics), *Qianjia shi zhushi* 千家詩註釋 (Commentary on Various Poets), and an extremely rare copy of the *Fumu jiaxun* 婦女家訓 (Family Instructions for Women). This last work, published ca. 1910, is a character book instructing women in the Confucian ideals of docility and obedience, complete with illustrations featuring women embroidering, washing, and tending the garden. Before I discuss how Jesuit missionaries of the seventeenth century employed accommodationist strategies in their catechetical efforts, I would like to dilate a bit on the content of native Chinese character books. In Wang Yinglin's *Sanzijing* the reader is immediately confronted with a very Mencian form of instruction, beginning with the two couplets:

人之初，性本善。Humans at birth - have an originally good nature.
性相近，習相遠。Their nature is similar - but their training is different.

Human nature is of course intrinsically good in this model, and resonating with Mencius' "Ox Mountain" metaphor we are informed that we are either corrupted or advanced by what comes after our birth: viz., our training.

These couplets are followed by two more that emphasize the importance of study.

苟不教，性乃遷。If they are not taught - their nature will corrupt.
教之道，貴以專。The way of learning - is to stress whole-hearted devotion to it.

In essence, we are exhorted to study in order to prevent our original nature from deteriorating – a notion quite unlike the Christian doctrine of original sin. And immediately following the *Sanzijing*'s definition of human nature and exhortation to study, the primer

alludes to Liu Xiang's 劉向 (77-6) famous "Meng mu san qian" 孟母三遷 account in his

Lienuzhuan 列女傳:

昔孟母，擇鄰處。Long ago Mencius' mother - chose a neighborhood in which to live.

子不學，斷機杼。Her son did not study - so she cut the web from the loom.

Once again, the theme of how context influences one's nature is exploited in the classical account of how Mencius' mother moved near a school to provide a proper environment for her son's education and cut her loom to demonstrate the importance of constant application. The *Sanzijing*, then, is a work thoroughly anchored in post-Song Neo-Confucian tenets, replete with allusions to the hallowed texts and paragons of the literati elite.

The *Funujiaoxun*'s similarly hortative narrative is directed at women rather than young boys. (Incidentally, the only extant editions of this work I can locate are datable to ca. 1910, from a Shanghai publisher.⁵) The text is structured in parallel couplets, each line containing seven characters; and like the *Sanzijing* it provides moral instruction according to classical Confucian precepts. The opening couplets read:

三皇治世立人間，五帝為君賢相連。The Three Rulers governed their eras and established human order – the Five Emperors ruled by linking together with worthies.⁶

天地人生分男女，夫妻本是人倫先。Heaven, earth, and humans are divided into male and female – husband and wife are the origin of human relationships.

So, this primer for women begins with the origins of human hierarchy and relationships, grounded in the common ideals of late-imperial Confucianism. The work also opens with an

⁵ That is, *Funujiaoxun* 婦女家訓 (Shanghai 上海: Guangyi shuju 廣益書局, ca. 1910).

⁶ The Three Rulers are Fu Xi, Shennong, and Huangdi; the Five Emperors are Tai Hao, Yandi, Huangdi, Shao Hao, and Zhuan Xu.

allusion to the legendary paragons of Chinese culture. But it soon after turns to its true hortatory agenda:

女子必須講婦道，三從四德自古傳。Women must discuss the womanly Way – the Three Followings and the Four Virtues transmitted from antiquity.

Here the text begins its outline of Liu Xiang's account of the "Three Womanly Followings" and Ban Zhao's 班昭 (45-116) "Four Virtues" in her famous *Nujie* 女誡 (Lessons For Women). Like the *Sanzijing*, the *Funujiaxun*'s narrative enforces already embedded Confucian ideals.

Let me turn now to how Jesuits borrowed from and transformed the *qimeng* tradition. Once they had read through China's textual corpus they began to formulate strategies of catechizing newly converted native Chinese, and keeping in line with their accommodationist approach they naturally borrowed from the character book tradition. These *zishu* were conveniently set into easily memorized syntax, relying on clever rhymes and parallel couplets. Since Chinese children were already used to studying in this format, it was a sensible technique. One such character book was Giulio Aleni's 艾儒略 (1582-1649) *Sizijingwen* (Four Character Classic), first published in 1642, probably in Fujian. I am only aware of two extant editions of this work, the original 1642 manuscript held in the Pope's Private Library at the Vatican, and a re-typeset edition published by the Printing Office of Nazareth (納匝肋靜院印) in 1903, a Catholic publishing house in Hong Kong that redistributed several rare Vatican works in the early twentieth century.

Perhaps the most striking difference between the Jesuit *qimeng* texts and those produced by native Chinese, is that while they begin with the topic of origins, the origins that Jesuit works begin with would have been curiously foreign, if not outrageous, to native Chinese readers. For example, the *Sanzijing* begins with the origin of human nature, the

Funujiaxun begins with the origin of human relationships, and Aleni's *Sizijingwen* begins with the Creation, alluding to accounts in the Bible as well as Dante Alighieri's (1265-1321)

Commedia. The *Sizijingwen* first defines the "Lord of Heaven" 天主 in somewhat simple terms.

全能天主，萬有真原。The Lord of Heaven is omnipotent - the true origin of all things.

無始無終，常生常王。He is without beginning and without end - ever living and ever ruling.

無所不在，無所不知。He is all places - and all knowing.

無所不能，萬物之始。He can do all things - and is the beginning of all things.

無性無聖，靈性妙用。Without form or sound - His spiritual works are subtle.

萬萬榮福，萬萬美善。Boundless are His glorious blessings - and boundless is His goodness.

惟一至尊，無以加尚。He alone is most honored - and nothing can add to His eminence.

Certainly such abstract definitions of an omnipotent being would not have seemed too odd; the opening lines of the *Daodejing* 道德經 (Way and Virtue Classic) are at least as abstruse.

But what follows is more complex and peculiar:

未有天地，先有天主。When there was not yet Heaven and Earth - first there was the Lord of Heaven.

一天主父，二天主子。Lord of Heaven the Father is first - Lord of Heaven the Son is second.

三曰聖神，三位一體。The third is called the Holy Ghost - and [these form] the Holy Trinity.

生天生地，生神生物。He created heaven and He created earth - He created spirits and He created objects.

生我初人，為人類祖。He created the first people - to be ancestors of all humans.

萬品從生，真大父母。Once the myriad things had been created - [came] the truly great [first] parents.

造化神工，六日迺備。The divine work of creation - was finished in six days.

第一日生，絕頂高天。On the first day of creation - He divided the peak of high heaven.

無數天神，泥沌水地。There were countless angels - and from the inchoate mass, water and earth.

地經地緯，俱九萬里。The longitude and latitude of the earth - extended the myriad expanse.

A first-time native Chinese reader must have been quite confounded with this passage's Trinitarian message, not to mention the question of what these *tianshen*, 天神 "heaven spirits," or "angels," were supposed to be.

Aleni's four-character classic continues to describe the center of the earth, and places there not mentioned in Chinese mythogeographies such as the *Shanhaijing* 山海經 (Mountains and Seas Classic).

地之中心，有四大穴。In the center of the earth - there were four great caverns. 一曰永苦，二曰煉獄。The first is called eternal suffering [hell] - the second is called the prison of refinement [purgatory]. 三曰孩所，四曰靈薄。The third is called the limbo of unborn children - the fourth is called the limbo of the Fathers.

This passage requires little explanation to the Western reader: it clearly refers to Dante's vision of hell, shaped like a funnel that reaches the earth's center. Placed beneath the city of Jerusalem there are caverns containing the damned and suffering souls in hell, purgatory, and limbo. This version of hell is not actually unimaginable in light of the Chinese notion of *diyu*, 地獄 or an "underground court" in the earth consisting of several levels of chambers wherein souls are sent to atone for earthly wrongdoings. But nonetheless, the Jesuit character book departs widely from the more common Confucian works in the same format. It is similar enough to count as emulation, but dissimilar enough to arouse suspicion.

In the end, one wonders what kind of reception such a work as the *Sizijingwen* received among Chinese readers. There are only two copies of this work in existence that I am aware of, while Confucian primers are still being republished in large numbers, especially in Taiwan. The reality is that the Vatican and other ecclesial archives hold hundreds of such works, still preserved but not studied or translated. My present work is to research and begin translating these works so that they may finally be exposed to scholarly scrutiny.

Perhaps the most exigent question that comes to my mind as I read through these manuscripts is how the Jesuits hoped their accomodationist works would be received. Did they hope that by imitating Chinese genres they would slowly transmogrify Chinese worldviews into Western worldviews? This problem is actually quite complex. As Eric Hoffer (1889-1983) wrote, "It is not so much the example of others we imitate as the reflection of ourselves in their eyes and the echo of ourselves in their words." Was Jesuitical imitation, then, a subtle way to highlight intrinsic similarities between China and the West, or was it something else? John Weiss (1818-1879) believed that, "Imitation forms our manners, our opinions, our very lives." So, did these Jesuits, like Aleni who imitated China's native *ertong wenxue* tradition, in the end transform those they imitated, or did they really just become more like them?