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Agency and Mutuality: Cross-Cultural Exchange in Early Jesuit Missions to China

*Lauren Nitschke*¹

The sixteenth-century Catholic Church faced an era of uncertainty, as the Protestant Reformation threatened the dominance of Catholicism across Europe. As an act of Counter-Reformation, Saint Ignatius of Loyola's religious order, the Society of Jesus, assumed a critical role in the spreading of the Catholic faith beginning in 1534.² The Society of Jesus, or the "Jesuits", became a force for Catholic-integrated education, establishing schools globally that incorporated secular and academic instruction with the intention of re-securing Catholic authority. This revolutionary form of missionizing established the Jesuits as both a religious force and as conveyors of European technologies and philosophy across several continents. While the Jesuits have been credited with this expansion of faith and knowledge, scholarship frequently neglects the potential of missions as sources of interaction and debate among differing schools of thought. Often, the Jesuits are positioned as transmitters of Western knowledge that non-Christian societies simply incorporated and built upon, despite their most famous endeavor unfolding within one of history's most powerful global civilizations: China.

The exchange of knowledge between Jesuit missionaries and the Chinese population they sought to convert was not a simple transfer of Western ideas, but a complex discourse between opposing ideologies and traditions, allowing scholars on both sides to build on and incorporate elements of each other's knowledge into their own findings. The sentiments of 'knowledge transfer' neglect the agency of those with whom Jesuits interacted. The Chinese Empire had prioritized the study of mathematics, astronomy, and medicine for centuries before the Jesuits' arrival. Jesuits entering the Empire brought little to entice the Chinese Imperial Court regarding scripture or Catholicism, as they had arrived in a well-established Empire with centuries of religious tradition. Instead, the Jesuits took a passive religious approach to missionizing. This strategy required proving to Chinese scholars that the West had erudition to offer through scientific and philosophical contributions. They then hoped that Western revelations would draw the Chinese toward European Humanism and eventually, Catholicism. The Jesuits would need to establish the worthiness of their presence in China by impressing the Imperial Court and collaborating with scholars on academic matters.

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² "Our Founder, Our History", Jesuits.org, Accessed 13 December 2024, <https://www.jesuits.org/about-us/ignatius-of-loyola/>.

This paper will first analyze the context of interactions between Chinese and Jesuit scholars and then explore the resulting contributions to both Western and Eastern scholasticism that emerged from these dynamics. In doing so, it adds to the discourse that the Jesuit settlements in China fostered a mutual exchange, shaped by both parties' agency and self-determination, thereby providing context for both accounts of the interaction and informing complex interpretations of global exchange.

Interactions Between Chinese and Jesuit Scholars

If the Jesuits intended to be admitted to China by initially proving themselves academically, they first needed to collaborate with esteemed Chinese Scholars. Critical Jesuit figure Matteo Ricci recorded Jesuit travels to the East and described the intent behind them by detailing the context in which the plan materialized. He recounts that in 1578, Jesuit Alexander Valignano arrived in Portuguese Macao, stationed along the Southernmost coast of China. While Valignano's mission was to reach Japan, his proximity to China allowed him to make attuned observations of the empire. Ricci noted that through bartering between the Chinese and the Portuguese, those in Macao had noticed the suspicious and isolationist nature of the Chinese, which had turned many missionaries off from attempting Catholic conversions in China.³ Previous efforts from Saint Francis Xavier, who had made it his dying wish to reach the people of China, were rejected by others stationed in Macao. They feared Xavier would face brutality and imprisonment, as well as disrupt trade, by attempting to push Catholicism.⁴ However, Valignano's observations rekindled the desire to make progress in the Empire, allowing a new perspective to emerge. According to Ricci, Valignano believed the key to their access in China was knowledge:

Judging from the immense expanse of this empire, from the nobility of character of its people and from the fact that they had lived in peace for centuries, surely the wisdom of their system of public administration and the well-known prudence of their governing Magistrates would seem to favor the proposed expedition. One can easily believe that a clever and accomplished people, devoted to the study of the fine arts, could be persuaded to accept a few strangers, who were also distinguished for their learning and virtue, to come and dwell among them, especially if their visitors were well versed in the Chinese language and literature. There seemed to be some hope also that

³ Matteo Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matteo Ricci: 1583–1610*, trans. Louis J. Gallagher (New York: Random House, 1953), p. 130, accessed 13 December 2024, <https://archive.org/details/chinainsixteenth0000ricc/page/n9/mode/1up>.

⁴M. T. Kelly, *A Life of Saint Francis Xavier Based on Authentic Sources* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Company, 1918), pp. 229–36, <https://books.google.com/books?id=JeFb6uaqo34C>.

this people would one day gladly accept the Christian religion, seeing that it could serve as a help rather than as a detriment to their system of government.⁵

Ricci notes that this strategy eventually proved successful, as the Jesuits were admitted to China under the guise of new technology, having presented an elaborate watch.⁶ After several attempts, they were permitted to establish a permanent residence and Church in Zhaoqing in 1583.⁷ By prioritizing an academically forward approach, the Jesuits put themselves in a position to collaborate with the Chinese. The foundation for cooperation is evident in displays of mutual respect and admiration. This mutuality is what distinguishes the Jesuits' interactions with the Chinese from societies they deemed "barbaric", needing to be salvaged by Catholicism. In Jesuit records from the New World, Father Sebastien Rasles proclaimed the Native people of Nanrantsouak (present-day Maine) were "less barbarous than all the rest of the Indians", due to their acceptance of Catholicism, thus revealing the Jesuits' belief in their superiority amongst groups who did not submit to the doctrine.⁸ Conversely, Chinese advancements and agency were apparent to the Jesuits, as Matteo Ricci's journal attests. Ricci claims "the Chinese have not only made considerable progress in moral philosophy, but in astronomy and in many branches of mathematics as well."⁹ The Jesuit acknowledgment of not only scientific but also philosophical advancements in China was crucial. Ricci believed that if the Chinese shared a similar worldview, they would be more receptive to European education, and more critically, religion. This context underscores the Jesuits' perceptions of the Chinese, despite their non-Christianity. A combination of intellectual respect and desire to convince them of European superiority forced the missionaries into a state of bargaining. They had to present ideas in a manner that fostered Chinese interest and respect, while attempting to prove Humanist superiority to achieve conversion. While it was apparent that the Jesuits respected elements of Chinese society, their trips continued to face skepticism and volatility, furthering the notion that the two opposing cultures were forced to negotiate with one another.

⁵ Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, p.130.

⁶ Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, pp.137-38.

⁷ A. C. Hosne, "Friendship among Literati: Matteo Ricci SJ (1552–1610) in Late Ming China," *Journal of Transcultural Studies* 5:1 (2014): p. 190, <https://doi.org/10.11588/ts.2014.1.11362>.

⁸ Sebastien Rasles, "Letter II" in *The Early Jesuit Missions in North America*, trans. Rev. William Ingraham (New York Historical Society, 1847), 27, accessed 13 December 2024 <https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcmassbookdig.earlyjesuitmissi01kipw/?sp=69&st=pdf&cr=-0.365%2C0.251%2C1.856%2C1.856%2C0&pdfPage=53>.

⁹ Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, p. 30.

Chinese suspicion is most apparent in Hsu Guanqi's *Memorial*. The piece is a defense of the intersection of Eastern and Western knowledge, in response to critiques from Chinese officials regarding the Jesuits' missionary presence. Hsu and Father Matteo Ricci had established a relationship, translating a variety of Western works into Chinese. Their close collaboration led to Hsu's conversion to Catholicism, after which he emerged as a leader of the Chinese Catholic community. As tensions between the Jesuits and Catholics swelled, Guangqi wrote a defense of the Jesuit missionaries' presence, drawing on his high standing within the Chinese Catholic community and his membership in the prestigious Hanlin Academy. His status as an intellectual elite who had worked alongside the Jesuits positioned him as a key figure in defending the recently expelled Jesuit missionaries. The Nanjing Persecution (1616-17) was a response by the Ministry of Rites to the perceived threat of Catholicism within China, arresting and banishing Missionaries from the empire.¹⁰ Guangqi's *Memorial*, addressed to the Wanli Emperor, makes a case for their sustained residency.

The piece underscores discomfort stemming from new learning systems and conflicting ideologies, revealing the need to preserve a Chinese worldview. The opposition to Jesuit presence in China is seen in the Board of Rites' disdain for Western contributions in *Memorial*: "Their doctrines are penetrating deep, and spreading wide, so that even men of eminence are believing in them; although their discourses about astronomy are absurd, yet even scholars are falling into their cloudy visions."¹¹ The Board of Rites' expulsion of the Jesuits demonstrates the lengths to which officials went to combat the influx of European ideology, underscoring both the obstacles Jesuits encountered in obtaining prolonged residency and the authority of the Chinese.

However, Hsu's *Memorial* served multiple purposes: it not only uncovered the power of the Chinese in their interactions with Western society but also revealed how Chinese officials' opposition fostered mutual collaboration. Hsu proposed systems for examining the Jesuits to appeal to officials and to permit them to remain in China. The *Memorial* suggests "three modes of examination to ascertain the truth", which consisted of calling the courtiers to the capital to translate Jesuit works, putting them up for debate against both Buddhist and Taoist works, and having them reviewed and approved by the emperor.¹² It can be seen from these proposals of debate that both sides understood the necessity of comparing all available information, not only to appeal to the opposition but to discern which theories are worth pursuing and upholding. The significance of Guangqi's appeal to the emperor is that it illustrates how collaborations between two ideologies may be met with opposition. Yet, discourse is necessary to further scientific and societal evolution on a global scale. The opposition

¹⁰ Edward Thomas Kelly, *The Anti-Christian Persecution of 1616-1617 in Nanking* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1971), ii-iii, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/bcd07e129dfe21fa30b9e315a32ecfd9/1>.

¹¹ Hsu, Memorial to Fra Matteo Ricci, 1617."

¹² Hsu, Memorial to Fra Matteo Ricci, 1617."

the Jesuits faced throughout their stay in China is undoubtedly a major factor in their scientific development, as disagreement must be resolved through collaboration if ideas are to be accepted. Despite Guangqi's calls for an appeal, the Chinese officials remained steadfast in their decision. It was not until several years later that the Jesuits regained entrance to China.

The interactions between Hsu and Matteo Ricci also provide insight into the dynamics between Chinese and Jesuit scholars, most notably through their joint translation of Euclidean geometry. It is notable that while both Ricci and Guangqi shared Catholic ideology and believed in the Jesuit mission of conversion, their decision to translate a mathematical work over a religious piece can be attributed to a cultural emphasis on mathematical tradition, fostering Chinese engagement with the work through an academic lens.¹³ Hsu and fellow scholars noted that early works of Chinese mathematics had ceased to be intelligible throughout the passage of dynasties, acknowledging the opportunity to fill these gaps with the works of the Jesuits.¹⁴ Chinese scholar, Wensheng Wang, acknowledges the aforementioned differing motives of the Jesuits and Chinese scholars stating, "Ricci was more interested in utilizing Euclidean geometry to propagate Catholicism than in diffusing the scientific work itself; on the other hand, his co-translator was most keen on putting the Jesuit knowledge into the service of statecraft instead of studying Jihe Yuanben for its pure scientific or religious value", providing further evidence that these opposing motivations set the stage for both sides to have autonomy in consuming and debating their academicism.¹⁵ In the end, the translation of Euclidean Geometry was successful for both parties, serving as a foundation for new Chinese mathematics and motivating Chinese scholars to study under the Jesuits, broadening the Catholic reach across the country, as further explored later in this piece.

The translation laid the groundwork for Ricci's growing respect within China. Chinese authorities, however, refused to take these observations at face value, still skeptical of the foreigners and Catholicism. As previously mentioned by Hsu's *Memorial*, debate with authorities was critical. While Ricci was admired, he had to continually defend his position. Ricci took account of one of these interactions with a celebrated Buddhist minister of the temple in his journal: "The Invitation was accepted and Father Matthew opened the discussion by saying: "Before we descend into the arena for debate, I would like to know what you think of the first principle of heaven and earth and the Creator of all things else whom we call the God of Heaven". While Ricci attempted to discuss religion, his Catholic rhetoric was swiftly shot down by the minister, who responded by stating that while he could

¹³ Wensheng Wang, "Science, Religion and Sino-Western Exchanges: Literati-Jesuit Translation of Euclidean Geometry and Its Reception from Late Ming to Mid-Qing," *Journal of Chinese History* 8:1 (2021): pp.119-20, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2022.38>.

¹⁴ Wang, "Science, Religion and Sino Western Exchanges", p. 124.

¹⁵ Wang, "Science, Religion and Sino Western Exchanges", p. 129.

not “deny” the existence, that he sees no reason to “cede to him in any respect”, then further proclaimed himself the Creator’s ‘equal’. The minister and Ricci proceed to debate the merits of this claim, ending with Ricci accusing the minister of distorting the truth. However, after the room settled, they discussed Ricci’s philosophical and scientific observations, which allowed the debate to continue. The minister “asked Father Matthew if he were versed in mathematics, saying that he had heard that he had a reputation as an eminent astronomer.”¹⁶ They then debated philosophy, calmly articulating their beliefs regarding images of the sun and moon in one’s mind. Ricci proved himself an intellectual, enabling a productive conversation with the Chinese officials. The Chinese immediately opposed the discussion points regarding Catholicism, but engagement resumed after Ricci established himself as an astronomer and philosopher. By finding common ground and leaving room for both parties to discuss their perspectives, the Chinese and the Jesuits established their own agency while fostering an interaction in which both could make intellectual gains.

The Jesuits and their unique approach to missionizing arrived in China with the intent to spread the Catholic word. Instead, they were met with intense speculation and intermittent authorization within the country’s borders. They faced an empire that emphasized knowledge and tradition and was not impressed by mere scripture. This dynamic provides a key understanding of the exchange of information when two traditions are in opposition. By understanding the motivations of the Jesuits, as well as the principles and autonomy of the Chinese, it follows that conflicts of interest in both intent and ideology would not permit a simple transfer of knowledge. Therefore, both schools of thought had to conflict, debate, and eventually build off one another to reach their individual goals.

Jesuit Impact on Chinese Scholarship

With both groups positioning themselves for rigorous intellectual engagement and dynamic dialogue, the encounter resulted in the mutual reshaping of each school of thought. The Jesuits’ impact on the Chinese is widely documented, as the collaborative works between the two groups are evident in both Chinese and Jesuit sources. One critical example of this collaboration was the reform of the Chinese calendar. German Jesuit Johann Adam Schall Von Bell arrived on the Chinese mainland in 1622 after previously studying the astronomical system of Galileo.¹⁷ With these advancements, he correctly predicted an eclipse in 1629, earning his position in China as a translator of Western books and, more

¹⁶ Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, pp. 339-40.

¹⁷ Yunli Shi, “The Astronomical Images in the First Chinese Treatise on the Telescope by Johann Adam Schall von Bell Revisited,” *NTM Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Wissenschaften, Technik und Medizin* 28:3 (2020): pp. 451–79, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00048-020-00259-3>

notably, to reform the Chinese calendar.¹⁸ After reforming the calendar, he presented his ideas to the new Qing Emperor in a work titled *Enlightening the Bewildered about the New Calendar* in 1645. He answered questions about the new calendar and synthesized Chinese tradition and Western technology in his explanations. By taking a multicultural approach, Schall presented his work in a way that respected Chinese tradition, thereby preserving his trusted status. This is exemplified by his incorporation of elements of fortune-telling that, while considered “elements of suspicion” and inappropriate within Catholicism, showed deference for Chinese customs. Schall’s ability to address what the Chinese valued, as well as his aptitude to impress the Imperial Court while potentially risking conflict within his faith, reveals how much the Jesuit scholar valued collaboration with the Chinese. This risk paid off for Schall, as Emperor Shunzhi adopted the new calendrical system and offered a position as the director of the Bureau of Astronomy. Schall’s eventual acceptance of the role led Emperor Shunzhi to initiate a policy of tolerance for Catholicism.¹⁹ The incorporation of Western technology to revise the Chinese Calendar yielded valuable outcomes, as the Jesuits’ permission and eventual Chinese acceptance of Catholicism within the country were a result of these educational contributions.

As previously mentioned, Matteo Ricci’s and Hsu’s partnership on the Chinese translation of an ancient Greek text, Euclid’s *Elements*, is also recognized as a key example of Jesuit-Chinese collaboration. Matteo Ricci described working alongside Hsu in his journal, recounting the intense duration of their time together: “By labor and study, and by listening to Father Matthew for long hours, day after day, Ciu Paul (Hsu) made such progress that he wrote out in fine Chinese characters everything he had learned.”²⁰ While Ricci’s accounts may subtly undermine Hsu by portraying him as an eager pupil, the sustained duration of their collaboration highlights their dedication to working in tandem. Additionally, Hsu’s eagerness can be understood as a reflection of his nature as a scholar to absorb and share knowledge among other Chinese intellectuals. However, the real value of the translation of the Euclidean *Elements* is later revealed in Ricci’s Journal:

This book was greatly admired by the Chinese, and it had a considerable effect upon the rearrangement of their calendar. For a better understanding of it, many came to

¹⁸ Library of Congress, Johann Adam Schall von Bell, “Summary, Enlightening the Bewildered about the New Calendar,” accessed 13 December 2024,

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2021666326>.

¹⁹ Liyuan Liu, “When Missionary Astronomy Encountered Chinese Astrology: Johann Adam Schall von Bell and Chinese Calendar Reform in the Seventeenth Century,” *Physics in Perspective* 22: 2 (2020): p. 14,

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00016-020-00255-z>

²⁰ Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, p. 477.

Father Ricci to enroll as his pupils, and many also to [Hsu] [(...) they took to European scientific methods as readily as the Europeans themselves.²¹

This collaboration of Ricci and Hsu served as proof of the accuracy of Jesuit assumptions that they would earn the trust of the Chinese through intellectual ambition. Ricci cited it as a major draw for the Chinese to the Jesuit Order, as students came from across China to study its contributions. Further, Ricci's ability to liken the Chinese's ambitions to those of Europeans underscores a contrast with the typical tone of Western settlers towards 'foreign' people. Ricci's journals provide further proof of Jesuit impact on the Chinese school of thought, while simultaneously attending to the uniqueness of their dynamic. Ricci regarded the Chinese people with respect, admiring their eagerness to learn and societal advancements, despite disclaiming that this was surprising given their distance from Europe. His trust in Hsu as a teacher of Jesuit thought, while being native to China and a recent convert, also alludes to the mutuality within this specific relationship. Hsu's *Memorial* furthers the value of their connection as more than just merely settler-native, but one of respect and collaboration, as Guangqi's defense of the Jesuits is directly attributed to his experiences working with Ricci. However, while these sentiments may have been present in Jesuit-Chinese dynamics, both schools of thought on a larger scale shared an unwillingness to attribute their scientific advancements to their multicultural collaborations.

Ricci claimed in his journals that the Chinese's learning of concepts such as the roundness of the Earth, eclipses, the fixed nature of the stars, orbits, and writing out arithmetic, could all be attributed to the Jesuits, saying:

All of these seemingly incredible things were put to the test and prove[d] to [the] most pertinacious among them, and when one thing was clearly demonstrated, it was easier for them to accept the rest. [...] One can gather from this how the reputation of Europe was enhanced.²²

While Ricci claims that these ideas established Europe's positive reputation in China, Chinese scholars would dispute the origins of this knowledge. According to historian Qiong Zhang, 'Sinocentrism' in the late Qing dynasty led to the "Chinese origin of Western learning" theory, which stoked the notion that Jesuit ideas did not stem from the West; rather, they were initially discovered by Chinese scholars in antiquity.²³ While Sinocentric ideation was always pervasive within the scope of Jesuit and Chinese interactions, Qiong Zhang argues that the exchange of knowledge fostered competition, leading to

²¹ Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, p. 477.

²² Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, p. 326.

²³ Qiong Zhang, *Making the New World Their Own: Chinese Encounters with Jesuit Science in the Age of Discovery* (Brill, 2015), p. 9.

“deliberate misinterpretations, misrepresentations, and counter-discourses” to preserve the differing agendas of the two groups.²⁴ She claims this hostility led Chinese scholars to absorb Western ideas into their own school of thought, hence her book title, *Making the New World Their Own*. The primary support of Zhang’s argument is seen through the introduction, reception, and eventual integration of the “Terraqueous Globe”. Zhang’s scholarship supports Ricci’s claim that he introduced the spherical earth, stating that he demonstrated that the earth was a globe, “and cannot be otherwise.”²⁵ Zhang notes that initially, the Chinese positively received this idea, even highlighting the personal interest of the Kangxi Emperor, who engaged with the Jesuit tutors and challenged subjects by asking if the earth was “round or square”, then urging them to research the issue.²⁶ However, as Jesuit presence in China faded, new interpretations of these doctrines began to arise. Chinese scholar, Fang Zhongtong wrote that while the “study of the heavens” had been a “specialized field of scholarship” since the arrival of “Far Westerners”, those who study in this field fail to realize that “what this learning contains is all the methods of the Chinese sages that are based on the original laws of Heaven and Earth”²⁷ Therefore claiming that while Jesuits led to the topic’s revival, the origins of the subject were pioneered by Chinese sages far before interactions with the West. This example of the “terraqueous globe” displays how Western ideas from Catholic Jesuit sources were accepted and then assimilated into Chinese doctrine. Zhang further identifies this idea by saying, “by prompting various attempts to integrate the new, Jesuit mediated Western learning into the old, preexisting Chinese knowledge base, now reinterpreted (...) in light of this new knowledge (...), this rupture in substance was presented under the cover of cultural revival”.²⁸ Chinese discomfort with the Jesuits’ presence is an overarching narrative, beginning from the arrival of the Jesuits to an eventual Sinocentric absorption of ideas, reshaping origins to align with the doctrines of antiquated sages. This further reveals how the dynamic between the Jesuits and the Chinese could not have been a transfer of knowledge. Instead, these ideas were bargained with and rewritten in ways that sustained the agency of the Chinese by recalling ancient doctrine and discrediting Jesuit contributions. Therefore, significant ideas were introduced by the Jesuits, as noted by both Jesuit and Chinese sources, but these ideas were not simply passed from West to East; instead, they were molded by complex discussions informed by control and ego from both parties.

Chinese Impact on Jesuit Scholarship

²⁴ Zhang, *Making the New World Their Own*, p. 19

²⁵ Zhang, *Making the New World Their Own*, p. 151

²⁶ Zhang, *Making the New World Their Own*, p. 163.

²⁷ Zhang, *Making the New World Their Own*, p. 195.

²⁸ Zhang, *Making the New World Their Own*, p. 359.

While modern scholarship acknowledges the Chinese authority in their relations with the Jesuits, it has neglected to treat their dynamics as a discussion or exchange. Those studying the Jesuits frequently explore the concepts through the lens of bestowal upon China. Scholars of China tend to focus on their agency in the interaction, as seen in Zhang's analysis, which proves the Chinese were not submissive recipients. Through this complex lens of discourse and self-preservation for both parties, there is an apparent lack of scholarship on Chinese contributions to the West. With so much dialogue between the two schools of thought and numerous records from Jesuit sources being sent back to Europe, the evidence of a Chinese impact should be overwhelming. However, a Eurocentric worldview of the revolution of knowledge positions the West as the epicenter of global thought, with other societies falling in line. This dilutes the evidence of knowledge traveling East to West, which is primarily hidden within the subtext. Jesuit scholars sent thousands of pages of writing back to Europe, thoroughly describing Chinese ideas such as mathematics, language, astronomy, architecture, medicine, botany, and culture. These ideas often come with a disclaimer, ensuring the reader is aware that Europeans still hold a superior status. However, the care in Jesuit descriptions shows their admiration for Chinese ambition and their desire to subtly absorb it into Western thought. So, while the impact of the Chinese on Jesuit scholarship is less apparent, it is surviving and significant.

French missionary Louis Le Comte's *Memoirs and Observations* made during his journey to China in 1699 provide valuable insight into the preserved descriptions of China relayed back to Europe. While his admiration for many elements of Chinese thought is palpable, he insists that, even as he 'admired' what he was describing, the European way remained superior. However, he would then share key details to either recreate or expand on Chinese findings and technology. One key example of this comes from Le Comte's description of the Observatory in Peking, modern-day Beijing. He describes the observatory in great detail, including measurements and an in-depth drawing of its layout and instruments. He was most fascinated by the "celestial globe of six feet diameter", which he claimed to be the "fairest and best fashioned of all of the instruments."²⁹ While his admiration is apparent, his intention in sharing these details is affirmed by his disclaimer. He stated,

"I wondered how men who live 6000 leagues from us, could go through such a piece of work; and I must own, that if all the circles which are divided, had been corrected by some of our workmen, nothing could be more perfect in their kind"³⁰

²⁹ Louis le Comte, *Memoirs and Observations, Made in Late Journey Through the Empire of China, and Published in Several Letters*, Trans. Benjamin Tooke (London, 1699), p. 67.

https://archive.org/details/ldpd_6420736_000/page/n1/mode/1up.

³⁰ Comte, *Memoirs and Observations*, p. 68.

This quote, in tandem with drawings and measurements, reveals his belief that if recreated by Europeans, the instruments would be ‘perfect’ and unparalleled by the tools currently in use. While he maintained they were not up to European standards, Jesuit improvements on Chinese foundations could advance technology in the West. In line with the Chinese way of assimilating knowledge, Le Comte maintains the Jesuits’ authority and preserves the European ego by noting that the Chinese could not introduce anything to surpass European technological advancements. Le Comte’s tendency to praise aspects of Chinese work before reemphasizing its need for a European treatment is persistent throughout his notes. He wrote admirably of the extensive records of astronomical observations. He believed that while they may not be useful in their initial state, they may add to the previous scholarship of the Jesuits: “It hath not been unprofitable to posterity. We have above 400 observations, as well of the eclipses and comets, as conjunctions, that make good their chronology and may conduce to the perfecting of ours.”³¹ Le Comte shares observations of astronomy originally generated by the Chinese but presents it in a manner that does not credit them for their innovation, allowing the Jesuits to synthesize it into their own findings. Le Comte is therefore permitting the Jesuits to absorb the knowledge as their own, as his writings set up a defense for the Jesuits to take credit. If Chinese premises were flawed and the European way remained superior, the Jesuits could vindicate themselves from crediting Chinese observations, thereby maintaining the perceived superiority of Western scholasticism. Le Comte details the Chinese printing process, silk making, canals, architecture, and paper, all with an appreciation.³² The impressive detail of Chinese innovation across a variety of fields suggests the Jesuits’ intention to share these discoveries with the West. It mirrors the Chinese strategy of adopting them as their own.

In another account, Le Comte addresses the excellence of Chinese ink, noting that the French have tried to recreate it: “I hope you will not take it amiss if I speak a word or two concerning the quality of their ink: It is most excellent, and they have hitherto vainly tried in France to imitate it... It is not a liquor like ours, it is solid and resembles our mineral colours.”³³ This evidence of exchange is notable and displays how Chinese technologies spread to Europe, as well as unveils Le Comte’s respect for the Chinese, their ambition, and skills. While it cannot be assumed that Le Comte’s intent was for every item he described to be recreated, the extensive detail of his correspondence on the works of the Chinese was shared with fellow European scholars. It can therefore be implied that the impact of Chinese scholarship in the West was often diluted in its Western formatting. These examples illustrate the need to reapproach the analysis of the two systems of learning. When interacting with such sources,

³¹ Comte, *Memoirs and Observations*, p. 214.

³² Comte, *Memoirs and Observations*, pp.103, 139, 185.

³³ Comte, *Memoirs and Observations*, p. 187.

it is critical to regard them not simply as passing along ideas, but as complex discussions in which both parties prioritize self-determination.

Another example of materials and practices conveyed to the West by Jesuit scholars appears in a letter sent by Dr. William Sherard to the Duke of Tuscany in 1753. The letter is an in-depth description of how to use the ingredients that have been “presented to the Royal Society” to “improve the art of varnishing” using Chinese origins. Sherard credits the Chinese material and describes the process they underwent, but does not address the innovation. Rather, the practice is presented as a way to “improve” upon the existing European process of varnishing.³⁴ By attributing credit to the material, Sherard fails to acknowledge the advanced techniques of the Chinese people, despite providing step-by-step instructions for properly using the product, which he was taught during his time in China. Further, by mentioning the materials presented to the Royal Society, this letter speaks volumes about the process by which Jesuits introduced Chinese ideas and technologies to Europe. This protocol for presenting discoveries to the Royal Society reveals a procedure for introducing new knowledge, providing further evidence of the transmission of ideas from China to Europe during Jesuit missions.

Modern literature may fail to recognize Jesuit scholars of Chinese technology being sent to Europe as clear evidence of Western adoption of Chinese knowledge, as they frequently focus on ideas presented to the Chinese when studying these interactions. Presuming that these descriptions of innovation were inconsequential to the development of Jesuit thought is at odds with the process of knowledge adoption. By passing along these ideas to other Jesuits, it seems intuitive that they worked from these new revelations, introducing and molding them to fit within their own school of thought, paralleling the Sinocentric “Chinese origin of Western learning” theory.

While subliminal, hedged observations are difficult to observe in Jesuit literature, one branch of knowledge was highly traceable to its Chinese roots: medicine. Jesuit scholar Michael Boym observed this in his work *Medicus Sinicus*, or “Chinese Medicine”. The work included numerous drawings, diagnoses, and practices of Chinese medicine that Boym relayed back to Europe, written in Latin.³⁵ Perhaps the most pertinent observation Boym makes relates to the Ancient Chinese method of “pulse diagnosis”:

³⁴ William Sherard, “The Way of Making Several Chinese Varnishes” in *Philosophical Transactions*, (Royal Society of London, 1753), p. 526.

<https://archive.org/details/philtrans06511935/page/n1/mode/1up>.

³⁵ Michael Boym, *Specimen Medicinae Sinicae*, (Sumptibus Joannis Petri Zubrodt, 1682)

<https://digitalcollections.nyam.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A1113#page/12/mode/1up>.

“The Chinese Physician, or the Unique Art of Exploring the Pulses and to predict future symptoms and feelings of the sick delivered many centuries before Christ and brought to China; and this art is all admirable and different from the European.”^{36 37}

He conveyed veneration through extensive detail in a series of drawings and notes. He describes the process as follows: “explains his illness or affections to a Chinese physician, he himself and his past and future symptoms are [learned] after examining the pulse of both hands.”^{38 39}. The Jesuits highly valued this medical knowledge, as fellow scholar Le Comte also described the process and its global notoriety: “It must be confessed that they have acquired a particular skill in pulses that hath made them famous in the world.”⁴⁰ The global reach of this Chinese tradition reveals that the Jesuits not only absorbed this knowledge to advance Jesuit studies but also shared the technology with the rest of the Western world. Le Comte and Michael Boym each detail the medical procedure in their individual works, allowing the process to be observed in Europe. This is especially notable, as research has shown that Jesuit translations sparked a prolific interest from Europeans in the practice.⁴¹ They had attempted, and failed, to recreate the procedure. In one instance, this notoriety led to Xu Shizh, a Chinese physician who intended to become a Catholic priest, reaching Naples as a famous man. Rumors circulated that a Chinese physician capable of performing pulse diagnostics was migrating from China to Italy, causing mayhem even before he arrived in 1733. Xu Shizh’s pulse diagnostics technique elevated him to the top of Italian society, reserving his renowned skill for the elite.⁴² Xu and other Chinese physicians would not have faced this reception without the foundation built by Jesuit translations. Further, it reveals the influence the Jesuits had on Europeans, underscoring that the Chinese scholarship conveyed by the Jesuits likely had a broader impact than has been explored to date.

³⁶ Edward Kajdanski, “Michael Boym’s Medicus Sinicus,” *T’oung Pao*, 73:4 (1987): p. 162.

<https://doi.org/10.1163/156853287X00014>.

³⁷ “Medicus Sinicus, seu singularis Ars explorandi pulsuum et praedicendi et futura symptomata et affectionibus aegrotantium a multis ante Christum saeculis tradita et apud Sinas conseruata; quae quidem ars omnis est admirabilis et ab Europaea divers” Google Translate, “Latin to English translation,” accessed May 2026.

³⁸ Edward Kajdanski, “Michael Boym’s Medicus Sinicus,” p. 162.

³⁹ “ut aegrotus Sinico Medico suum morbum aut affectionibus explicet, ipse et praeterita et futura symptomata exacte post pulsum utriusque manus exploratum edici” Google Translate, “Latin to English translation,” accessed May 2026.

⁴⁰ Comte, *Memoirs and Observations*, p. 240.

⁴¹ Henrietta Harrison, “A Chinese Doctor in Eighteenth-Century Naples and the Practice of Pulse Diagnosis,” *Past & Present*, no. 268 (August 2025): pp. 51-53, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtae038>

⁴² Harrison, “Chinese Doctor in Eighteenth-Century Naples,” pp. 58-63.

Evidence for the reach of Chinese medicine is further revealed in Le Comte's description of "leaf of Thee". He states that the Chinese were not "subject to gout, sciatica, not stone, and many imagine that Thee preserves them against all these distempers."⁴³ While Le Comte himself was skeptical of the power of 'Thee', he noted that many in Europe had found great use for it: "In France there are abundance of people that find it good for gravel, crudities, headaches; nay some pretend to have been cured of the gout by it." Le Comte's account of this practice reaching France is significant and serves as evidence for the impact of the works sent back by Jesuits. Simply by observing the transfer of a material and its intended use, such as 'Thee' as a medical treatment, the Chinese impact on Europe is discernible. While scholarship does not attribute substantial contributions to Chinese ideas in Europe, medicinal and botanical evidence that could not fully be assimilated into European ideology, as tangible items such as "thee" or ink were more clearly non-European, speaks to the larger adoption of ideas that occurred and were suppressed by European scholars, especially after the issue of the Chinese Rites Controversy.

Missionary tactics to carefully integrate Chinese tradition into Catholicism, such as Schall's integration of "fortune telling" into his calendrical reform, and other articles, such as the Chinese translation of 'Christian God', drew suspicion from the Catholic Church. The amalgamation of tradition and religion halted in 1704, when Pope Clement XI forbade Chinese converts from participating in Confucian and ancient rituals.⁴⁴ The Chinese Rites Controversy affected both the Jesuits and the Chinese's standing in Rome, as their collaboration became tied to accusations of suspicion. This, however, stands as evidence of the assimilation of Chinese works into European ideology, obscuring their origins in the wake of controversy. The Jesuits could not openly claim their ties to the Chinese without facing backlash, leading many of these collaborations to be diluted and hidden in plain sight.

The lasting impacts of these interactions are apparent. The sheer number of Chinese materials remaining in Jesuit archives, such as the Vatican Library, Collegio Romano, and the 'Professed House' of the Jesuit General, speaks to the European fascination with Chinese scholarship.⁴⁵ By housing diverse Chinese texts ranging in topics from geography, history, and culture, Jesuit records became an epicenter for European bibliophiles and intellectuals, who were immensely interested in not only the content of the works, but the materials on which they were created, with several coming to simply

⁴³ Comte, *Memoirs and Observations*, p. 245.

⁴⁴ Ann Thuan Truong, "The Conflicts Among Religious Orders of Christianity in China during the 17th and 18th Centuries," *Science Journal of VolSU*, 26:5 (2021) <https://DOI:10.15688/jvolsu4.2021.5.5>.amid even as

⁴⁵ Albert Chan, "A Gate to China Materials in the Roman Jesuit Archives" in *Chinese Books and Documents in the Jesuit Archives in Rome: A Descriptive Catalogue*, (HNet Reviews, 2003), pp. 2-4.

observe Chinese paper.⁴⁶ Housing these Chinese documents within Jesuit archives attests to the impact these works had on Jesuit scholars. While the Jesuits may have attempted to make it appear as though they had simply introduced Western and Catholic ideas, the immense number of records, correspondence, and literature **attests** to the impact of these interactions. It quietly argues that there was an impact on European scholarship, even if the outward evidence of contribution is veiled in subtext.

Modern scholarship's inability to discuss the presence of Chinese influence in the context of Jesuit interactions likely stems from a Eurocentric view of the origins of early modern science and philosophical contributions. Further, the Chinese Rights Controversy contributed to the marginalization of Chinese thought in Europe, undermining scientific discovery through accusations of heresy. These themes resonate with the Sinocentric fashion in which the Chinese adapted Jesuit knowledge to align with their own worldview.

Conclusion

There is frequently a heavily Eurocentric perspective of early modern science and philosophy. Scholarship has given ample credit for the spread of European advancements to other cultures, while frequently overlooking the innovations of these societies before their settlement. China presents an intriguing counterpoint, as its established empire offered a context in which Jesuit missionaries had more to prove than to offer, leading to a complex and interactive intellectual dynamic. Therefore, this case highlights historically neglected contributions from non-European cultures and provides valuable insight into the process of globalizing ideas.

While the Jesuit impact on China is well documented in the records of both parties, Chinese contributions have been overlooked. However, the flood of Chinese works in Jesuit archives served as evidence of the Jesuits' admiration for Eastern medicine, technology, and intellectual rigor. Further, the transmission of Chinese innovation to Europe through Jesuit letters implies an appreciation and fascination with these works, alluding to their adoption into the Western worldview and eventual loss of their origins.

The interactions between the Jesuit missionaries and Chinese scholars represent a complex exchange of knowledge, in which both sides exhibit hesitancy toward opposing ideologies, allowing for critique and debate. However, the need for self-determination for both factions determined how they absorbed and adapted knowledge. The Chinese evolved toward a Sinocentric worldview while the Jesuits failed to credit the Chinese for their advancements, conserving both parties' perceived theological and institutional superiority. Despite these challenges, early interactions set the stage for the evolution of globalized thought.

⁴⁶ Chan, "A Gate to China Materials in the Roman Jesuit Archives" pp. 2-4.

In contrast to the Jesuits' approach in the New World, where the indigenous were often dismissed as 'barbaric', interactions between the Chinese and the Jesuits were marked by a degree of intellectual and cultural regard. This reverence allowed a period of mutual exchange to prevail, demonstrating that productive discussions rely on both sides having the agency to challenge conflicting ideas. The Jesuits' mission to China is a case study into how cross-cultural intellectual exchanges are fostered when both parties maintain power, as opposed to outcomes of unidirectional transfer. Ultimately, this interaction underscores the necessity of respecting opposing cultural traditions, as a fight for ideological superiority only results in the dissolution of relationships and the erasure of credit.