

## The Catholic Four-Character Classic (*Tianzhu shengjiao sizi jingwen* 天主聖教四字經文): A Confucian Pattern to Spread a Foreign Faith in Late Ming China<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** *The generation of missionaries which followed Ricci's method after his death in the 17th century, continued to work among the Chinese literati, producing a variety of religious, philosophical, and scientific treatises. Yet, the Jesuits, including Ricci himself, did not neglect the instruction of new converts through simpler text (doctrinae), devised to teach the Christian dogmas in a language that could be easily recited by those who could read, and memorized by the flock. One of the most well-known missionaries of the post-Ricci generation was the Italian Giulio Aleni (1582-1649), active in the southern provinces of Zhejiang and Fujian between the 1620s and 1649. Aleni was not only interested in converting the literati, but also tried, with the help of Chinese Christians, to build a strong local church at the popular level. Among his numerous works in Chinese, one which certainly bears witness to this evangelical effort at the grass root level is a booklet entitled The Four-Character Classic of the Holy Religion of the Lord of Heaven (Tianzhu shengjiao sizi jingwen, original ed. 1642; revised 1663 ed.). For whom was this Christian primer written? How was it used in religious education? How did it compare with similar texts in other religious traditions of China? These are questions I will try to answer in this essay.*

**Riassunto.** *La generazione di missionari che seguì il metodo di Ricci dopo la sua morte nel corso del Seicento continuò a lavorare tra i letterati cinesi, producendo una varietà di trattati religiosi, filosofici e scientifici. Tuttavia, i gesuiti, compreso lo stesso Ricci, non trascurarono l'istruzione dei nuovi convertiti attraverso testi più semplici (doctrinae), ideati per insegnare i dogmi cristiani in un linguaggio che potesse essere facilmente recitato da coloro che sapevano leggere, e memorizzato dai fedeli. Uno dei missionari più noti della generazione post-Ricci fu l'italiano Giulio Aleni (1582-1649), attivo nelle province meridionali di Zhejiang e Fujian tra gli anni 1620 e 1649. Aleni non era solo interessato a convertire i letterati, ma cercò anche, con l'aiuto dei cristiani cinesi, di costruire una chiesa locale a livello più popolare. Tra le sue numerose opere in cinese, una che certamente testimonia questo sforzo evangelico è un libretto intitolato Il Classico dei Quattro Caratteri della Santa Religione del Signore del Cielo (Tianzhu shengjiao sizi jingwen, ed. originale 1642; ed. riveduta 1663). Per chi fu scritto questo abbecedario*

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was first conceived as a seminar paper at the University of California at Berkeley long ago, in 1992. I circulated it among select scholars in the past, including the late Prof. Erik ZÜRCHER (Leiden University), and Prof. Benjamin ELMAN (formerly at UCLA and Princeton University), who cited it in his volume *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000, p. 270, note 85. Most recently, the essay was employed by Anthony CLARK in his translation: *A Catholic Jesuit Catechism. Giulio Aleni's Four Character Classic* 四字經文, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. The present version of my essay has been updated and revised to reflect recent scholarship whenever necessary.

*cristiano? Come veniva usato nell'educazione religiosa? Come si compara con testi simili in altre tradizioni religiose della Cina? Queste sono domande a cui cercherò di rispondere nel mio saggio.*

### Introduction

Scholars have long been interested in the philosophical discussions between the early Catholic missionaries and Chinese literati in the late Ming period. The most famous text in that tradition of cross-cultural communication is no doubt *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (Tianzhu shiyi)* by Matteo Ricci, a philosophical dialogue between a fictitious Western sage and a Chinese one. That complex and sophisticated tome has been seen as an attempt at a “pre-evangelical” dialogue with non-believers (*catechismus*), rather than being a tool for the doctrinal instruction of catechumens<sup>2</sup>.

The generation of missionaries which followed Ricci’s method after his death, continued to work among the literati, producing a variety of religious, philosophical, and scientific treatises. However, once again their language was more apt to a cultivated public than to the semi-literate masses. Yet, the Jesuits, including Ricci himself, did not neglect the instruction of new converts through simpler text (*doctrinae*), devised to teach the Christian dogmas in a language that could be easily recited by those who could read, and memorized by the flock. The catechetical methods and texts the Jesuits used to teach the basic tenets of the Catholic faith have received renewed attention in the last two decades or so, starting with a posthumous 1999 important bibliographic essay by Joseph Dehergne SJ, who had worked for years at its compilation<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> The first such Catholic *catechismus* is Michele Ruggieri’s *Tianzhu shilu* (1582), where the Jesuits called themselves “Bonzes from India” (*Tianzhuguo seng*); see P. D’ELIA, *Fonti Ricciane*, Roma, Libreria dello Stato, 1942, vol. 1, p. 197, note b; another more “orthodox” catechism is Juan Da Rocha’s *Tianzhu shengjiao qimeng* (1619), a translation of Marco Jorge’s *Cartilha* (see P. D’ELIA, *Fonti Ricciane*, cit., vol. 1, p. 384, note a).

<sup>3</sup> See J. DEHERGNE SJ and R. MALEK SVD, *Catéchismes et catéchèse des Jésuites de Chine de 1584 à 1800, Monumenta Serica* 47 (1999): 397–478; today the online *Chinese Christian Texts Database (CCT-Database; <http://www.arts.kuleuven.be/sinology/cct>)*, edited by Ad Dudink and Nicolas Standaert SJ, can also be used to retrieve updated details and location of editions of these early catechisms. The first modern comprehensive introduction to the topic of catechesis in China is J. JENNES CICM, *Het godsdienstonderricht in China: Historische ontwikkeling van de apologie en de catechese in de Missiën van China vanaf de XVIde eeuw tot op heden*, Brasschat, De Bièvre, 1942, translated in Chinese and English as *Four Centuries of Catechetics in China. Historical Evolution of Apologetics and Catechetics in the Catholic Mission of China from the 16th Century until 1940*, Taipei, Tianzhujiao Hua Ming shuju, 1975. A good summary of literature up to 2000 and taxonomy of catechisms in China is presented in the section “Catechetical and theological writings,” in N. STANDAERT SJ ed., *Handbook of Christianity in China. Volume One: 635-1800*, Leiden, Brill, 2001, pp. 608–616. Most recently, see E. RAINI, G. RIZZI and ZHAO HONGTAO (趙宏濤) eds., *Repertorio dei catechismi cinesi nella Biblioteca della Pontificia Università Urbaniana*, Rome, Urbaniana University Press, 2019; and WANG WENLU 王雯璐, *Translating Christianity into Asia: Chinese Catholic Catechisms of the 17th Century* (in Japanese), PhD dissertation, Division of Asian Studies, Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology, the University of Tokyo, Japan, 2020.

One of the most well-known missionaries of the post-Ricci generation was the Italian Giulio Aleni (1582-1649), active in the southern provinces of Zhejiang and Fujian between the 1620s and 1649. Aleni was not only interested in converting the literati, but also tried, with the help of Chinese Christians, to build a strong local church at the popular level. Among his numerous works in Chinese, one which certainly bears witness to this evangelical effort at the grass root level is a booklet entitled *The Four-Character Classic of the Holy Religion of the Lord of Heaven* (*Tianzhu shengjiao sizi jingwen*, original ed. 1642; revised 1663 edition)<sup>4</sup>. For whom was this Christian primer written? How was it used in religious education? How did it compare with similar texts in other religious traditions of China? These are questions I will try to answer in the following pages.

By the late Ming, China already had a long tradition in the writing of primers, which went back at least as far as the sixth century, time of composition of the oldest primer, the *Qianziwen*. Usually, primers were a powerful instrument to convey Confucian values to the younger generations, which were learning the written language as a first step towards the imperial examinations and the official career, or more simply were doing so for practical purposes. So effective was this mnemonic format, that “heterodox” groups, like Christians, Muslims and the Taiping rebels, also made educational use of it to transmit different ideological contents. A comparison of Aleni’s Catholic primer, the Muslim *Tianfang sanzijing zhujie* (Commentary to the Arabic *Sanzijing*, preface 1819; edition 1870) and the Taiping *Sanzijing* (1852) and *Yuzhi qianzi zhao* (The Imperially Composed Thousand Words Edict, 1854) will help us better understand differences and similarities between these different religious traditions.

Of course, I will never lose sight of the original primers, the Confucian ones, in particular the *Qianziwen* and the *Sanzijing*. It was their pattern which shaped the “heterodox” primers, and it was also their respectability as an educational tool which probably suggested to Christians and Muslims the usage of similar “devices.”

### *Popular Education and Primers in Ming China*

In China, advanced literacy was not an exclusive privilege of the elites. The administrative structure of the Chinese bureaucracy presupposed the existence of a large number of “sub-bureaucrats” or yamen clerks, with a varying grade of knowledge of the written language. According to Qu Tongzu, a minimum of 300,000 literate clerks participated in local government at any one time, not including those serving in prefectural, provincial and central government offices<sup>5</sup>. Merchants had also to be literate, since they had to keep registers of their transactions; boat owners, brokers, wharf heads etc. had to keep commercial and

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<sup>4</sup> The most complete bibliographic description of this text and its editions is available at the *CCT Database*: [http://heron-net.be/pa\\_cct/index.php/Detail/objects/2614](http://heron-net.be/pa_cct/index.php/Detail/objects/2614)

<sup>5</sup> T’UNG-TSU CH’Ü (Qu Tongzu), *Local Government in China under the Ch’ing*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1962, pp. 43-44.

administrative books, and written contracts were required at all levels. Even peasants had a rudimentary knowledge of the written language, and were able to read elementary materials. They, or at least the chiefs of the households, had to keep *baojia* police registers and lists for tax collection of the *lijia* system. Emphasis was of course put on practical matters, as demonstrated by the existence of “collections of miscellaneous characters” (*zazi*). These syllabaries were constituted of series of simple characters and corresponding pictures of common objects.

A factor that greatly eased the spread of literacy in China was the availability of books at low cost. From the 16th century on, specialized firms produced a vast array of printed material for educational purposes: arithmetic guides, character books, illustrated reading primers, “orthodox” traditional primers, popular encyclopedias, books of morality and so on<sup>6</sup>.

Since the Christian text I will analyze later, as far as its style is concerned, falls into the category of “orthodox” traditional primers, I will briefly examine their style and contents. This kind of primers was used to teach children how to learn to read, not to write. The initial pace of learning to write is slower than the pace that can be achieved in character recognition, and many complex and difficult characters were included in these primers. The couplets were learned by heart, and every day as much as ten characters were memorized by the students; in one year the triad *San-Qian-Bai* (*Sanzijing* – *Qianziwen* – *Baijixing*) could be learned, bringing the total of characters so memorized to approximately 2,000.

The *Sanzijing*, a primer written in the Song period, consisted of 356 lines of three characters, introducing a total of 500 characters. It was the text with which many children began their studies, and a large part of the book contained hortatory injunctions, interspersed with historical anecdotes and information on nature and family bonds. The *Qianziwen*, probably dating back to the sixth century, presented 1,000 characters in rhymed form, giving basic information together with Confucian lessons on cosmology, China’s history, its great men and precepts of moral conduct. Both these texts occupied a central position in orthodox elementary education. These books were used in the elementary schools, usually to teach beginning students. The same books were also the first to be memorized by boys born in the households of degree holders, officials and wealthy men, who received a private education at home. Schools were considered a convenient and effective channel for ideological indoctrination of the common people, and the simple sentences of the primers were perfectly apt to achieve this aim.

Villagers usually hired a teacher for the local children. Teachers were often low-degree holders who had not been successful in the official career or in passing the upper examinations. Boys from poor families could take advantage of clan schools and public charitable schools (*yixue*). Moreover, “China experienced an expansion of educational opportunities during the Ming, when a network of elementary schools was established across the country. These schools, called

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed treatment of these books, see E. RAWSKI, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch’ing China*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1979, pp. 125-139.

*shexue* (lower level community schools) were encouraged by the government, and supplemented privately financed institutions, which had always been the major channel for literacy<sup>7</sup>. *Shexue* were also able to penetrate in rural areas. Usually these institutions were established with funding raised directly by the local officials, local elite families, sometimes guilds and group of villagers, and were rarely dependent on central government's funds. Both community and charitable schools were devoted to elementary education. Sons of peasants were usually unable to go beyond this stage of education: their work was required in the fields, and the family could rarely support a long curriculum of study. One writer pointed out that "Farmers and the poor do not have far-reaching ambitions; they do not expect their sons to do more than several hundred characters and roughly know the meanings"<sup>8</sup>.

Besides primers, there was a large literature for aid in self-improvement and practical affairs. Morality books (*shanshu*) reveal popular religious sentiments: books such as *Ledgers of Merit and Demerit (gongguo ge)*, which presented lists of good and bad deeds to be "graded," or as *Meritorious Deeds at No Cost*, emerged in response to a demand for moral guides suited to the needs of the ordinary people, especially in the late Ming period<sup>9</sup>.

#### *Religious Education in the China Jesuit Mission: Giulio Aleni (1582-1649)*

Giulio Aleni was born in Brescia, at the time part of the Republic of Venice, in 1582<sup>10</sup>. After his training as a Jesuit, first in northern Italy and then in Rome, he left Europe in 1609 on a Portuguese ship. He stopped at Goa for a while, and finally reached Macao in 1611. There he studied Chinese, and spent the following two years teaching at the Jesuit college and trying to enter China. In 1613 he finally succeeded, and was sent to the Nanjing's mission, where four other fathers were at work. Only three years later, the first serious persecution hit the Chinese mission in the whole country, but particularly in Nanjing. At this time, the Jesuits of the Lower Yangzi region took refuge in Yang Tingyun's house in Hangzhou.

Yang (1557-1627) was one of the most famous converts of the entire Christian community, and made use of his political influence to protect the missionary from the attacks of their main opponent, the Vice Minister of Rites of Nanjing, Shen

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<sup>7</sup> E. RAWSKI, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China*, cit., p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Shangcheng xianzhi*, 1803 ed., *juan* 6, p. 3b, as quoted in E. RAWSKI, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China*, cit., p. 49.

<sup>9</sup> T. SAKAI, *Confucianism and Popular Educational Works*, in *Self and Society in Ming Thought*, edited by William T. de Bary, New York, Columbia U.P., 1970, pp. 331-366; cfr. C. BROKAW, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China*, Princeton University Press, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> A brief biography of Aleni can be found in L.C. GOODRICH and FANG CHAOYING, *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, New York, Columbia U.P., 1976, pp. 2-3; cfr. J. DEHERGNE SJ, *Répertoire des Jésuites de Chine de 1552 à 1800*, Roma, Institutum Historicum S.I., 1973, pp. 6-7; see also E. MENEGON, *Un solo Cielo. Giulio Aleni S.J. (1582-1649). Geografia, arte, scienza, religione dall'Europa alla Cina*, Brescia, Grafo, 1994.

Que<sup>11</sup>. It was during this forced “sojourn” that Yang and Aleni became better acquainted with each other. Under Yang’s direction, the Jesuits in Hangzhou studied intensively Chinese literature and language, and Giulio was certainly Yang’s most successful pupil, as universally acknowledged.

All his life, Aleni was involved in education<sup>12</sup>. After having been a teacher of humanities in Italy and of mathematics in Macao, once in China he also tutored in scientific subjects some Chinese literati, like the official Ma Chengxiu<sup>13</sup> in Yangzhou towards 1620. As observed by Erik Zürcher, “this milieu of ‘local intellectuals’ appears to have been the favorite environment of the Jesuit mission in late Ming times”<sup>14</sup>.

Probably out of his interest in education, and perhaps also following suggestions from some Chinese converts, Aleni composed in 1642 a booklet to teach the basic tenets of Christianity, the *Four-Character Classic of the Holy Religion of the Lord of Heaven* or more simply the *Catholic Four-Character Classic*<sup>15</sup>. At this time, Aleni was in Fujian as Vice-Provincial of the South China Jesuit Mission. Fujian was among the most prosperous Christian missions in China, especially thanks to the energy of Aleni. It is also the best documented Christian community of the period: the *Kouduo richao* (Journal of Oral Instructions, after 1640) composed by a devout scholar, Li Jiubiao, recorded the travels, the discussions with converts and opponents and the religious methods of Aleni from 1631 to 1640<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> A biography in L.C. GOODRICH and FANG CHAOYING, *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, cit., pp. 1177-1178.

<sup>12</sup> From its beginnings, the Society of Jesus had among its main goals the establishment of a new school system and the creation of a new study curriculum. A very interesting book on education written by the Jesuits in China is Vagnone’s *Tongyou jiaoyu* (Education of Children, 1620), where the Western educational principles were illustrated for the first time to the Chinese; see G. FALATO, *Alfonso Vagnone’s “Tongyou Jiaoyu” (On the Education of Children, c. 1632) – The Earliest Encounter between Chinese and European Pedagogy*, Leiden, Brill, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> See a biographical note in L.C. GOODRICH and FANG CHAOYING, *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, cit., p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> E. ZÜRCHER, *The Jesuit Mission in Fujian in Late Ming Times: Levels of Response*, in E.B. VERMEER (ed.), *Development and Decline of Fukien Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, Leiden, Brill, 1990, pp. 417-457.

<sup>15</sup> According to L. PFISTER, *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur les Jésuites de l’ancienne mission de Chine*, Shanghai, 1932-4, p. 134, followed by all bibliographies, the primer was first published in 1642, although I have been unable to find any edition bearing such an early date. Several editions were reprinted in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries (see *CCT Database*). In 1869 an illustrated edition with scenes from the Bible was printed by Vasseur, with the title of *Shengjiao shengxiang quantu* (Illustrations of Sacred Images of the Holy Religion). I consulted the 1663 edition, edited by Adam Schall, and reproduced from the copy in the Roman Archives of the Jesuits (ARSI), *Japonica Sinica* I, 174.5, in N. STANDAERT and A. DUDINK eds., *Yesuhui Luoma dang’anguan Ming-Qing Tianzhujiao wenxian - Chinese Christian Texts from the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus*, Taipei, Taipei Ricci Institute, 2002, vol. 2, pp. 297-384; other copies are preserved, e.g., at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, *Borgia Cinese* 334, nos. 15 and no. 26, now available online at the *Digital Vatican Library*, [https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS\\_Borg.cin.334](https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Borg.cin.334), images 388-419 and 616-647, respectively.

<sup>16</sup> See E. ZÜRCHER, *Giulio Aleni et ses relations avec le milieu des lettres chinois au XVII siècle*, in L. LANCIOTTI ed., *Venezia e l’Oriente*, Florence, L. Olschki, 1987, pp. 107-135; E. ZÜRCHER ed.,

However, Aleni's Chinese counterparts were always lower-gentry members: was the Christian primer written for them? The only answer can be no. These gentry members were educated, and the simple couplets of the primer were too childish for them. The primer may have been used to teach children and new converts of lower classes. This kind of catechetical work was usually left to Chinese Christians, and sometimes to the so called "Macaists," the lay brothers brought along by the Jesuits from Macao, who could speak both Portuguese and the local dialects. The Fathers, being few in numbers, and pursuing Ricci's policy of conversion of the upper strata, focused their attention on religious and philosophical debates, on scientific activities and on translation, composition, printing and diffusion of books on Western science and Christianity.

Where could our primer possibly have been used? We know that among the many "pious deeds" of Yang Tingyun, there was also the establishment of a "benefit school" (*renguan*) for "children who normally did not have the possibility to attend school. He was so closely involved with it that he often personally inspected the courses and even taught ethics"<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, to propagate Christianity, Yang had organized catechetical meetings in his house. Every month, on appointed days, men and women in separate rooms attended lessons on Christianity. Material similar to the later *Four-Character Classic* may have been a suitable for the school and the catechetical meetings, and we might speculate they might have been used there and in similar Christian institutions in other parts of China.

#### *The Contents of the 'Four-Character Classic'*

The primer is composed of 691 four-character couplets, and of 8 *Tianxue jingyan* (Admonitions of the Heavenly Teachings), bringing the total of characters to 2,828. Of course, many repetitions bring this number to many fewer. Compared to the "orthodox" primers, the Christian primer is much longer. As we have already seen, these primers were used to memorize characters and to impress Confucian values onto the minds of the youth. The same goals were certainly behind the Christian primer. On the one hand, it was conceived to help the sons of Christian converts (not necessarily only those of the lower classes) and the less literate people to memorize some basic truths on the nature of the Christian God and on the contents of the Bible, especially the New Testament. On the other hand, it offered a familiar pattern, and this both helped to accept its contents and to convey a sense of "Chineseness" to the religious instruction. Once again, we witness the use of a Confucian frame by the Jesuits to propagate their foreign faith.

The first couplets describe the qualities of God: he is omnipotent, eternal, lacks a beginning and an end, is omnipresent, without shape and sound, beautiful and perfectly good. He is Father (*fu*), Son (*zi*) and Holy Spirit (*shengshen*), "three

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*Kouduo Richao. Li Jiubiao's Diary of Oral Admonitions: A Late Ming Christian Journal*, Nettetal, Steyler Verlag, 2007, 2 vols.

<sup>17</sup> N. STANDAERT, *Yang Tingyun, Confucian and Christian in Late Ming China*, Leiden, Brill, 1988, p. 88.

persons in one substance” (*san wei yi ti*). He is the “real great Father-Mother” (*zhen da fumu*), an expression used in the Confucian tradition to indicate the attitude of the emperor towards his subjects.

In six days, God created the universe. Aleni gives in these couplets the classical medieval cosmological view of the world: this worldview was based on Aristotle’s theory of the celestial phenomena which had been fully Christianized by the thirteenth century theologians Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas. They held that the earth was an immobile sphere situated in the center of a series of centric spherical shells, or orbs, called heavens. All this was surrounded by the crystalline heaven, which consisted of the element water, and which was connected with the highest heaven, *coelum empyreum*. This heaven was the seat of God, the angels and the saints. Hell (*yong ku*, “eternal pain” in Aleni’s words) was located on the earth; above hell there was purgatory (*lianyu*, the “purification prison”) where the sinners expiated their faults. Next was a *limbus puerorum* (*haisuo*, the “place of the children”) for the children who had not been baptized, and a *limbus patrum* (*lingbo*, a phonetical transliteration of the Italian or Portuguese “limbo”) for the saints who had lived before Christ and who had been liberated when he “descended into hell.”

The four elements of the Western tradition, fire, air, water and earth had given shape to the world: in all the Jesuits’ writings the fifth element, peculiar of the Chinese tradition, i.e. metal, was not considered.

On the sixth day God created the first human beings: Adam (*Yadang*) and Eve (*Ewa*). He ordered them to pursue good deeds and avoid evil. “In the high you will love your Lord, on the earth, men” (couplets 75-76, p. 2b). But a rebel angel, i.e. the devil, induced them to commit the original sin, and they had to leave the Terrestrial Paradise (*ditang*). “That’s why death exists: because of the original sin (*yuanzui*)” (couplets 86-87, p. 2b).

A discussion on the human nature and on the immortality of soul followed. Contrary to what the Buddhists taught, the individual soul was eternal, and did not dissolve after the death of the body.

In the following pages came a sketchy description of the story of the human kind following creation. After 2,245 years since creation, because of human sins, God sent the deluge. Only Noah (*Nuowa*), his relatives and the animals could survive this catastrophe; after 40 days, the survivors could land and begin anew the spread of the human race on earth. The three sons of Noah gave birth to different peoples in different continents: the peoples of Asia (*Yaxiya*) were descendants of Shem (Sheng), those of Africa (*Liweiya*, lit. “Lybia”) were descendants of Ham (*Gang*) and those of Europe of Japhet (*Yafude*).

Since after some centuries men were still committing sins, God sent a saint, called Moses (*Meise*), to explain to the common people God’s precepts and lead them to virtue. “The first teaching is: serve your Lord. The second is: love other men. The third is: be magnanimous in governing the country” (couplets 157-160, pp. 4a). This somewhat modified form of the Commandments is interesting



especially in its third point: it sounds more like a Confucian preoccupation, than a Christian one!

Most of the second part of the primer was dedicated to stories from the New Testament: the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem; the visit of the Three Magi; the massacre of the innocent babies ordered by Herod (*Heiluo*); the beginning of preaching by Jesus at the age of thirty-one; his baptism in the Jordan river; the calling of the disciples, especially of Simon (*Ximan*), later named Peter (*Baiduolu*, i.e. “Petrus”); the miracle of transmuting water into wine at Canaan and other “innumerable miracles” (*wushu shengji*); finally, a detailed account of the passion of Jesus.

A list of the sacraments and a brief description of the procedures to enter the Church followed. Then there was a long description of the Final Judgement, the coming of the Anti-Christ (*jia Tianzhu*) and the fight between Christ and the devil, paraphrased from the Apocalypse of St. John. This depiction of hell and the final judgement must have reminded many Chinese readers of the lengthy descriptions of hells in Buddhist religious writings.

In the last page, four “*bu ke wang*” (“it cannot be forgotten”) and four “*bu de*” (“it must not” or “cannot”) closed the primer:

The grace of the Creation of Things by God,  
the grace of the Incarnation of God,  
the grace of the Passion of God,  
the grace of the Remission of sins by God,  
they cannot be forgotten!  
The coming [of God] after death is unavoidable,  
the severity of [His] judgement is unmatched,  
the sorrows of Hell are unbearable,  
the joys of Paradise are incomparable!<sup>18</sup>

*Other Religious Primers: the Muslim ‘Tianfang Sanzijing zhujie,’ and the Taiping ‘Sanzijing’ and ‘Yuzhi qianzizhao’*

The use by the Jesuits of the primer format for their own religious purposes is not the only historical instance of this kind. At least two examples of such primers used for ideological and religious purposes (but many more may exist, also in more ancient times) survive from the nineteenth century, and below I will offer a brief description for comparative purposes.

The first one is the Muslim primer *Tianfang Sanzijing zhujie* (Commentary to the Arabic *Sanzijing*, preface 1809; edition 1870)<sup>19</sup> by Liu Jielian from “Jinling”

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<sup>18</sup> *Four-Character Classic*, p. 14b.

<sup>19</sup> The edition I used in 1992 (preserved in the East Asian Library, University of California at Berkeley, call number 1988.5 7080) is a commentary (*zhujie*), while the original was composed by Liu Zhi in the early 18th century. Today that copy of the commentary is online at HathiTrust:

(the Golden Mausoleum), i.e. the noted Muslim master Liu Zhi (ca. 1662–1736) from Nanjing; in the frontispiece is written that “the printing blocks are kept in the Mosque of Zhenjiang,” the seat of an important prefecture in Jiangsu, along the Yangzi river and not too far from Nanjing. In the preface, Yuan Guozuo, Liu’s disciple (*houxue*), wrote that “the Western [i.e. Arabic] and Eastern characters are different and when one reads them aloud, their meaning is absolutely unclear” (*Dong-Xi zi yi wen, yao du le bu ming qi yi*, preface, p. 1), and that’s why he had decided to write a simple explanation of the Muslim religion. The commentary was probably intended as a teaching aid for the use of Mosque school masters. The primer consists of 498 couplets of three characters each, for a total of 1,494 characters, and of relatively long commentaries following groups of couplets varying in number.

The opening couplets read as follows: “At the beginning of Heaven and Earth, and of the Ten Thousand Beings, there was the Most Venerable, called the True God [Allah]” (couplets 1-4, p. 1a). The terminology used in the remaining text is more “Chinese” than that found in the Catholic primer: in speaking of the Creation of the world, words like *li* (principle), *qi* (ether), *ying* and *yang* are used. Such words are absent in Aleni’s text. Also, the deeds of the sages sent by Allah to enlighten men are completely “Confucianized”: they taught filial piety, respect for parents and masters, the difference between those who deserve respect and the mean people, the virtues of humanity (*ren*) and politeness, the rites, the good deeds to be accomplished and the evils to avoid. An interesting note in the commentary gives us an idea of the pedagogical methods used in the mosque’s school: “The real beginning of education is the reading at the age of six or seven, for both boys and girls, of the *xiao xizha*” (Small Pleasant Instructions?). *Xizha* are the basis of the alphabet of the Western regions [i.e. the Arabic script]. Only after that, children can read the actual *Sanzijing*. When beginning their studies, children are taught in a simplified way how to show filial piety to their parents, to respect masters and elders, to live in harmony with their villagers. To be able to abide by the religious rules, one must first know the [Confucian] virtues of humanity (*ren*), justice (*yi*), rituality (*li*), wisdom (*zhi*) and faithfulness (*xin*): these are the five constant virtues of the Human Way. Recite [the Koran], practice the rites, fast, be instructed and bow [to Mecca, holy city for Muslims], these are the five meritorious deeds of Islamism”<sup>20</sup>. The author was certainly trying to make clear that, to be a good subject in the Chinese empire, one had first to be “Confucian,” and only after that, a religious believer.

Chinese Muslims launched several uprisings during Qianlong’s reign, and the *jihad* (holy wars) declared by the khans of Kokand, west of Chinese Turkestan, had

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<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.c079002847&view=1up&seq=6>. For recent research on this text, see R. TONTINI, *Muslim Sanzijing: Shifts and Continuities in the Definition of Islam in China*, Brill, 2016, especially chapter 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Tianfang Sanzijing zhujie*, pp. 5b-6a.

kept the outermost areas of Qing control in Kashgar and Yarkand in constant turmoil during the early nineteenth century. In the more settled agricultural areas of North China there were also sizable Muslim communities, containing perhaps one million or more faithful, and prosperous mosques stood in Henan and Anhui. Another area of great Muslim concentration was Yunnan, where a revolt erupted in 1855, and brought to the foundation of the *Pingnan Guo* (Kingdom of the Pacified South), headed by Du Wenxiu, self-proclaimed “Sultan Suleiman” of Dali. In Shaanxi and Gansu another Muslim rebellion broke out in 1862, encouraged by the contemporary success of the Taiping. It sprang out of ethnic tension between Muslim and Chinese, and soon reached the city of Xi’an, which was put under siege. It took the Qing army almost nine years to subdue the rebels, an achievement of the famous anti-Taiping leader Zuo Zongtang.

During the Tongzhi Restoration, it is not unlikely that a campaign of re-education of the Muslims along Confucian lines was brought about by officials. The new edition of our Arabic *Sanzijing* in 1870 could have been part of this campaign. In any case, since this Muslim primer had been published in Jiangsu, where Muslims were a small minority and where the Confucian orthodoxy was stronger, it is no wonder that many Confucian principles are to be found in the text and in the commentary.

The Taiping *Sanzijing*, first published in 1852, and the *Yuzhi qianzi zhao* (The Imperially Composed Thousand Words Edict), published in 1854, are other notable examples of the use of primers for ideological purposes. However, while both the Catholic and Muslim primers were in general rather “orthodox” in their form and contents, the openly rebellious nature of the Taiping regime, and its hybrid anti-Confucian ideology, gave a strong heterodox flavor to their primers. Both were official publications of the Taiping government<sup>21</sup>.

The Taiping *Sanzijing*, it has been suggested, was modeled after a Protestant primer of religious nature existing at the time: however, since the contents of the Taiping primer are mostly derived from the Ancient Testament and Chinese history, it differs remarkably from the Protestant primer, which was based on episodes from the New Testament only<sup>22</sup>. Owing to its historical significance, the Taiping *Sanzijing* was translated by contemporary foreign observers, particularly interested in assessing the Christian ideology of the Taiping<sup>23</sup>. The Reverend Mr. S.C. Malan translated the original “Trimetrical Classic” together with the Protestant and Taiping versions, and draws the conclusion that “whatever be the political importance of the ‘patriot’ insurrection, the Christianity of Tae-Ping-wang is an imposture.... He shews [sic] himself a Christian only so far as it may promote

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<sup>21</sup> Complete English translations of these books are available and I will use them for my brief comparison: F. MICHAEL and CHANG CHUNG-LI, *The Taiping Rebellion, History and Documents*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1966, vol. 2, doc. 29, pp. 151-161 and doc. 51, pp. 408-415.

<sup>22</sup> See F. MICHAEL, *The Taiping Rebellion*, cit., p. 152.

<sup>23</sup> Translations in S.C. MALAN, *The Three-fold San-Tze-King*, London, 1856; Medhurst, W.H., in *North China Herald*, May 21, 1853, p. 168. See F. MICHAEL, *The Taiping Rebellion*, cit., p. 152.

his own self-aggrandizement, or tend to facilitate his political conquest; and, in fact, he is far less a disciple of Christ than of Confucius...”<sup>24</sup>.

Though it is true that traces of Confucian filial piety were still visible in the Taiping primer, nevertheless, they are minimal if compared with the descriptions of the story of Israel, of Jesus and of the leaders of the *Taiping Tianguo* which fills the rest of the book. Here are some moral precepts for children:

Little children, worship God; keep the Heavenly Commandments;  
do not be disorderly. [...]

Obey the parents of the flesh, and you will enjoy longevity;  
those who requite their parents will certainly obtain happiness.

Do not practice lewdness, nor any uncleanness; do not tell lies;  
do not kill or injure.

Do not steal, do not covet; the Great God - His laws are most severe<sup>25</sup>.

This is a simplified paraphrase of the Decalogue. Since one of the Christian Commandments in the Bible regards respect for parents, there is no need to think of a particular Confucian emphasis on filial piety in this primer. The “revolutionary” tone of the primer is more discernible in the description of the heroic journey of the Hebrew people through the desert, after having being freed by God from the slavery of Egypt. It seems to allude quite clearly to the struggle of the Taiping against the imperial government: this first part of the book should be seen in relation with the second part, where a detailed description of the rise of the Taiping leaders since 1848 is given in an almost epic way.

### *Conclusion*

The brief analysis of these three different types of primers has shown a common feature in the absorption of foreign religions in China, i.e. their Sinification. Both the Catholic and Muslim primers were designed to quell any doubt on the orthodoxy of their respective teachings.

In the case of the Catholic primer, we witness the “accommodationist approach” of the Jesuits. As a matter of fact, many “foreign” elements still persisted in the text, notably the transliterations of foreign names and the Aristotelian cosmological view. The Muslim primer appeared instead to have undergone a deeper Sinification: no wonder, since Islam had been introduced into China much earlier than Catholicism, and Muslim elites had embraced the imperial system. The Taiping primers well illustrate the use of a foreign religion, i.e. Christianity in its Protestant form, for socio-political purposes. Here the Sinification is probably even more complete than in the former two cases, but the ideas contained in these Taiping primers are far from being orthodox.

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<sup>24</sup> S.C. MALAN, *The Three-fold San-Tze-King*, cit., pp. 5-6.

<sup>25</sup> F. MICHAEL, *The Taiping Rebellion*, cit., pp. 160 and 161.

In an important interpretive essay, Erik Zürcher dissented from the thesis of Jacques Gernet on the impossibility of assimilation of Christianity in China<sup>26</sup>. Zürcher argued that Buddhism also contained ideas, such as *nirvana* and *karma*, which were alien to early Chinese thought and yet were eventually assimilated by the Chinese. The difference between Buddhism and Christianity was to be sought, in Zürcher's words, in the contrast of "expansion spontanée contre propagation dirigée." He argued that the difference lied between the spontaneous expansion of Buddhism fostered by a decentralized monastic system versus the directed propagation under the highly centralized control of the Jesuits. Consequently, the incompatibility of Christianity with China was not mainly one of ideas, as Gernet thought, but rather of institutions and traditional roles.

However, as rightly observed by David Mungello, "the Jesuit experience in China was merely one stage of a continuous history of Christianity in that land. To identify the entire history of Christianity in China with the early stage of assimilation of this religion associated with the Jesuit experience there during the 17th century would be like identifying the entire history of Buddhism in China with the early stage of assimilation of Buddhism associated with the teachings propagated by the disciples of the great translator Kumarajiva during the 4th and 5th centuries"<sup>27</sup>.

The crisis of the early Catholic missions as a consequence of the Rites Controversy in the second half of the 18th century prevented a deeper Sinicization of Catholic rituals and sacred texts. The Catholic *Four-Character Classic* represents therefore a rare and valuable example, a "unique example" in Professor Zürcher's words, of an early effort to accommodate Christianity to Chinese culture at the popular level<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> E. ZÜRCHER, *Bouddhisme, christianisme et société chinoise*, Paris, Julliard, 1990.

<sup>27</sup> D. MUNGELLO, "Review" to *Bouddhisme, christianisme et société chinoise* by E. Zürcher, in *Sino-Western Cultural Relations Journal*, XIV, 1992, pp. 43-44.

<sup>28</sup> Personal conversation with Erik Zürcher, S. Francisco, October 17, 1992.

