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Naples, China and the Cosmos: The Theology of an Eighteenth-Century Chinese Priest

by HENRIETTA HARRISON
University of Oxford China Centre
E-mail: henrietta.harrison@ames.ox.ac.uk

This paper examines the correspondence of Li Zibiao (1760–1826), a Chinese Catholic priest trained in Naples who worked as a missionary in North China. Whereas existing studies of Chinese theology mainly focus on contextualisation, Li responded to persecution by thinking in global terms and de-emphasising differences between Europe and China. Using developments in casuistry and the moral theology associated with Alphonso de Liguori he was able to avoid the strictures of the Chinese Rites Controversy. His story enriches the history of indigenous clergy in China and suggests some of the roots of China's resilient rural Catholicism.

In January 1791 Giacomo Ly, whose birth name was Li Zibiao, was one of a group of four Chinese priests examined in the presence of Pope Pius VI. All performed excellently and received the highest praise ('summam laudem').[1] The good grades were not surprising: at a time when European clerical training was often limited, Li had been studying in Naples for the priesthood since the age of twelve and had been ordained for several years. He was now ready to return to China as a missionary. There he was posted to Shanxi, in inland North China, where he spent periods hiding in a remote village where his chapel had previously been the village's Confucian shrine. Studies of Chinese Christianity have tended to emphasise cultural difference as a cause of persecution and

ACGOFM = Archivio della Curia Generalizia dell'Ordine dei Frati Minori, Rome; AION = Archivio Istituto Universitario Orientale, Naples; APF = Archivio Storico di Propaganda Fide, Rome

[1] Li Zibiao 李自標 (Jacobus/Giacomo Ly/May/Mai), ACGOFM, MH 23–4, 30, 33; APF, SC, Esami dei missionarii 3, p. 59.

celebrate periods in which Christianity was adapted to its Chinese context. For Li, however, Shanxi and Naples were bound together and the idea of a universal Church was central to how he understood his faith and mission.

This article uses Li's correspondence, preserved in archives in Naples and Rome, to examine his thinking. His letters, which are in Latin or occasionally Italian, were mostly written to report his year's activity and seldom deal explicitly with theology. However, his Latin was articulate and the letters give us rare access to the thinking of a Chinese priest in this period. A close reading suggests that he developed ways of thinking about his mission that were based in his Naples education, shaped by his Chinese identity and de-emphasised China's difference from Europe. The teachings of Alfonso de Liguori about moral theology and the sacraments helped him to deal with crises around apostasy in a time of intense state persecution, and made it possible for him to move away from the rigours of earlier papal rulings. In his later years Li also came to understand Napoleon's threat to the papacy and Qing persecution of Christians in China as parts of a cosmic battle between God and Satan, an interpretation that included China and Europe on strikingly equal terms.

Studies of the theology of Chinese Christians tend to concentrate on either the early modern Jesuit mission or twentieth-century Protestant modernisers.[2] The Jesuit policy of accommodation, which resulted in European missionaries working as astronomers and artists at the Chinese court, using Chinese terms for God, and accepting Confucian rituals as civil practices, has fascinated many modern scholars.[3] This period was brought to an end by the Yongzheng emperor's 1724 ban on Christianity as a heterodox sect (though he retained some European missionaries at court) and the 1742 bull *Ex quo singulari*, issued by Benedict XIV, which finally decided the disputes known as the Chinese Rites Controversy. Interest in the history of Chinese Christian thought revives for the early twentieth century when Protestants grappled with the issue of how to combine Chinese identity with a global Christian faith in a time of intense nationalism.[4] The lengthy period between these two moments of intellectual ferment tends to be seen as a time during which authentic Chinese understandings of Christianity hardly

[2] Chloë Starr, *Chinese theology: text and context*, New Haven 2016.

[3] Nicolas Standaert (ed.), *Handbook of Christianity in China*, I: *635–1800*, Leiden 2001; Dominic Sachsenmaier, *Global entanglements of a man who never travelled: a seventeenth-century Chinese Christian and his conflicted worlds*, New York 2020; Xueying Wang, '"The ancient rites of China": Yan Mo on ancestral rites during the Chinese Rites Controversy', *Journal of World Christianity* xii (2022), 90–112.

[4] Ryan Dunch, *Fuzhou Protestants and the making of modern China*, New Haven–London 2001.

existed. Instead the focus of scholarship has been on syncretism and the impact of imperialism.[5]

The struggle of Chinese Christians to achieve positions of authority within Churches that were established or funded by Western missionaries is woven through this history. For Catholics the narrative focuses on the Belgian missionary Vincent Lebbe and his campaign against imperialist attitudes within the Church which led to the consecration of six Chinese bishops in 1926 (the first since Luo Wenzao in 1674).[6] For Protestants the focus is on the growth of new, usually charismatic, groups founded by Chinese Christians.[7] However, projecting such narratives back from the twentieth century into the eighteenth is a complex matter. Li worked as a missionary in China at a time when the European powers were focused on the wars of the French revolution while Qing emperors permitted a few Catholic missionaries to remain at court. European missionaries who were discovered working in the interior ran the risk of harsh imprisonment, expulsion and death. Their visible difference meant that the few Europeans who remained had to act with great caution. This left significant control over the Church to Chinese priests and lay leaders who had a degree of authority within the Church that would not be seen again until the twentieth century.[8] However, little is known about them since they had to work in secret, it was difficult for them to publish in Chinese and the sources that do remain are scattered in European archives. The only Chinese priest in this period for whom there is significant scholarship is André Ly, who left a journal of his experiences running the Catholic church in Sichuan in the 1740s. This was found and published in 1906 when the failure of the Church to promote indigenous clergy was becoming a major issue. Since André Ly was clearly a competent and devoted missionary, his life was seen within the narrative of failed indigenisation. What studies there have been of his thought have looked for signs of innovation

[5] Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, *The Bible and the gun: Christianity in South China, 1860–1900*, New York–London 2003; Carl S. Kilcourse, 'Instructing the Heavenly King: Joseph Edkins's mission to correct the theology of Hong Xiuquan', this JOURNAL lxxi (2019), 116–34.

[6] Paul P. Mariani, 'The first six Chinese bishops of modern times: a study in church indigenization', *Catholic Historical Review* c (2014), 486–513.

[7] Xi Lian, *Redeemed by fire: the rise of popular Christianity in modern China*, New Haven–London 2010; Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, *China and the true Jesus: charisma and organization in a Chinese Christian Church*, New York 2018.

[8] David E. Mungello, *The Catholic invasion of China: remaking Chinese Christianity*, Lanham, MD 2015, 15–37; Henrietta Harrison, *The missionary's curse and other tales from a Chinese Catholic village*, Stanford, CA 2013, 41–91; Robert Entenmann, 'A mission without missionaries: Chinese Catholic clergy in Sichuan, 1746–1756', in Yangwen Zheng (ed.), *Sinicizing Christianity*, Leiden 2017, 31–54

and concluded that he was lacking in originality and that his thought replicated the European Catholicism in which he had been trained.[9]

However, individual identities can be complex, multi-layered, even hybrid, and Christian missions in the early modern period were part of networks of travel and encounter. Thinking about circuits and interactions, rather than the transfer of ideas outwards from the West, fits more easily with developments in the theology of mission which have recognised tensions between the need to indigenise and a desire for transformation as inherent in Christianity.[10] Moreover, the binary opposition between accommodation and European orthodoxy has recently been challenged by Antoni Üçerler in a work on the Jesuit mission to sixteenth-century Japan, where he argues for the flexibility of casuistry and moral probabilism as a method of making sense of European theological debates in Asia.[11] This has significant implications for China. New insights emerge from an examination of what aspects of European Catholicism Chinese priests took with them into their mission, why they did so and how their thinking developed on this basis. Like other Chinese Catholic priests of his generation, Li's thinking was shaped both by his Chinese identity and by his immersion in European culture. When he became interested in debates in the Early Church over how to treat those who apostatised during persecutions, it was because this issue affected him and his congregations, but also because his European education had given him the capacity to read patristic texts and interpret his situation in their terms. The result was an understanding that embraced China and Europe and allowed a flexible response to those Chinese Christians who renounced their faith under pressure but wished to return to the Church.

Li Zibiao was born into a Catholic family in the town of Wuwei on China's ancient Silk Road. His older brother, Li Zichang, was a successful officer in the Chinese army with a son, Li Jiong, who won China's top examination degree.[12] Li Zibiao, however, was sent off to Naples at the age of twelve with a visiting Chinese priest who was recruiting students to study

[9] Robert Entenmann, 'The Chinese writings and translations of Andreas Ly', and Jean Charbonnier, 'The catechetical approach of Andrew Li (1692–1775), a Chinese priest in Sichuan province', in Staf Vloeberghs (ed.), *History of catechesis in China*, Leuven 2008, 113–27, 129–50.

[10] Norig Neveu and others, 'Introduction', in Norig Neveu, Karène Sanchez Summerer and Annalaura Turiano (eds), *Missions and preaching: connected and decompartmentalized perspectives from the Middle East and North Africa*, Leiden–Boston 2022, 1–31; Andrew F. Walls, *The missionary movement in Christian history: studies in the transmission of faith*, New York 1996, 7–9.

[11] M. Antoni J. Üçerler, *The samurai and the cross: the Jesuit enterprise in early modern Japan*, New York 2022.

[12] Li Zichang 李自昌, Li Jiong李泂: ACGOFM, Missioni 53, raccolta di lettere degli alunni cinesi dalla Cina, 75, 119; Pan Yikui 潘挹奎, *Wuwei qijiu zhuan* 武威耆舊傳 [Biographies of Wuwei elders], [Wuwei *c.* 1820], iv. 14–15.

for ordination. There he was part of an institution usually known as the College for Chinese (now the University of Naples 'L'Orientale') which was, as he later put it, a 'costly and remarkable' foundation.[13] It had been established in 1732 by Matteo Ripa who had originally gone as a missionary to China for the Propaganda Fide. Ripa was successful in his work as an engraver at the Qing court but became disillusioned with the Jesuit approach to mission which, in his opinion, failed to prioritise evangelism. He decided that it would be better to train Chinese so that they could evangelise their own country, and returned to Naples, with four young Chinese men and a teacher, to establish a college.[14] By the time Li arrived in 1773, Ripa had died and the college consisted of the community Ripa had founded to provide teaching, fifteen Chinese students, eleven students from the Ottoman empire and a group of local fee-paying boys.[15]

The Chinese students of the college had the title of missionary, but their itineraries were circular and their identities complex.[16] Li's experiences as a foreigner in Naples would have made him very much aware of himself as Chinese, even as his education shaped him as a European gentleman. The Chinese began with studying Latin, which Li learned quickly.[17] Once they had mastered the language of the classroom they could take part in the college's broader education in grammar, humanities and rhetoric and then philosophy and metaphysics.[18] They also studied Chinese, taught by one of the older Chinese students who had completed a regular education before coming to Naples.[19] Around the age of eighteen, they began their training in theology.[20] The academic rigour of this is suggested by the textbook published by one of their teachers, Felice Cappello, in his old age. Designed around the student's progress through minor orders to priestly ordination, Cappello expects students to have a reading knowledge of Greek and Hebrew and introduces recent archaeological discoveries relevant to understanding the New Testament. He also expects and values

[13] 'sumptuosa et singularis': Jacobus Ly to Naples College, 25 Sept. 1822, AION, 16.1.15.

[14] Matteo Ripa, *Storia della fondazione della Congregazione e del Collegio dei Cinesi, sotto il titolo della sagra famiglia di G.C.*, Naples 1832, i. 21, 317–22; ii. 5–6, 133.

[15] *Elenchus alumnorum, decreta et documenta quae spectant ad Collegium Sacrae Familiae Neapolis*, Shanghai 1917, 2–5, 12–13; Tiziana Iannello, 'Il Collegio dei Cinesi durante il decennio francese (1806–15)', in Michele Fatica and Francesco D'Arelli (eds), *La missione Cattolica in Cina tra i secoli XVIII–XIX: Matteo Ripa e il Collegio dei Cinesi*, Naples 1999, 267–84.

[16] For the title 'missionary' see Luigi da Castellazzo to Propaganda, 30 Sept. 1862, APF, SC, Cina e regni adiacenti 19, p. 1073, and Josephus Van to Propaganda, 9 June 1873, APF, SC, Cina e regni adiacenti 25, p. 309.

[17] Nota degli alunni, APF, SC, Collegi vari 10, p. 442.

[18] Nota degli alunni, ibid. pp. 67, 240, 275, 514.

[19] Stato di signori alunni cinesi del 1782, ibid. 11, p. 147.

[20] Regolamente da proporsi in congregatione, ACGOFM, MH 7.5.

debate on controversial topics of the day: should priests wear distinctive clothing? Should they be required to be celibate?[21] Naples in the years before the French revolution was one of the hubs of the Enlightenment, and the Chinese college was by no means closed off from that world.[22]

Li's education meant that he was treated as a gentleman when in 1793 he and a classmate were invited to return to China as interpreters for the first British embassy to China. They travelled across Europe during the wars of the French revolution, spent two months living in London and sailed around the world with the embassy. When they arrived in China Li continued as interpreter to the Qing court. In this capacity he dealt daily with high-ranking Qing officials, attended the Qianlong emperor's magnificent birthday celebrations and received a gift of an embroidered purse from the emperor himself. These are foundational events in the history of Sino-British relations and Li's participation in them has been extensively studied.[23]

After the embassy Li travelled north to take up his vocation. He was sent to work in southern Shanxi, an area (about the size of Norway) of fertile plains surrounded by precipitous mountains. Christianity there dated back to 1625, when the Jesuit Alfonso Vagnone had taken refuge there after getting into political difficulties and developed close relations with local elites: the county magistrate erected a stele praising Christianity and calling him a 'Western Confucian'.[24] When Li arrived more than 150 years later he found himself the only priest responsible for about 3,000 Christians scattered across 600 towns and villages. Their leaders were members of the local elite who took prayer services, taught, baptised and controlled church finances and property.[25] His closest colleagues, two Italians and another Chinese trained in Naples, were based in the provincial capital several days journey through the mountains to the north, while

[21] Felice Cappello, *Hieropaedia catholica sive sacra instructio de diversis sacerdotii ordinibus in modum examinis exarata*, Naples 1804, 1, 6, 16, 115, 169–71.

[22] Domenicus Cyrillus to Propaganda, Sept. 1785, APF, SC, Collegi vari 11, p. 276; Giacomo Di Fiore and Michele Fatica, 'Vita di relazione e vita quotidiana nel Collegio dei Cinesi', in Giacomo Di Fatica (ed.), *Matteo Ripa e il Collegio dei Cinesi di Napoli (1682–1869): percorso documentario e iconografico*, Naples 2006, 21–48.

[23] Michele Fatica, 'Gli alunni del Collegium Sinicum di Napoli, la missione Macartney presso l'imperatore Qianlong e la richiesta di libertà di culto per i cristiani cinesi [1792–1793]', in S. M. Carletti, M. Sacchetti and P. Santangelo (eds), *Studi in onore di Lionello Lanciotti*, Naples 1996, 525–66; Henrietta Harrison, *The perils of interpreting: the extraordinary lives of two translators between Qing China and the British empire*, Princeton 2021, chs v–ix.

[24] '西儒': Fortunato Margiotti, *Il cattolicismo nello Shansi dalle origini al 1738*, Rome 1958, 594. See also pp. 89–105.

[25] Ly to Propaganda, 20 Dec. 1801, APF, SC, Cina e regni adiacenti 1a, p. 440. For lay leaders see Margiotti, *Il cattolicismo*, 306–25, 348–9, 602–3, 610–13.

Giambattista Cortenova di Mandello, the Franciscan vicar apostolic, was south across the Yellow River in Shaanxi province.[26]

Li worked in southern Shanxi, either alone or with the help of a younger Chinese priest, from 1794 until his death in 1826. This was a period when China's politics were dominated by a series of religious rebellions: Muslim (1781–4), White Lotus (1796–1804) and the Eight Trigrams (1813), the latter two led by Buddhist millenarian sects. Christians were affected because, to officials, they often looked very similar to both the Muslims with their foreign clergy, and the Buddhist sectarians with their communal prayers and fasting.[27] Debate over how best to respond to the rebellions tended to focus on whether their causes were primarily religious or economic.[28] When policy swung towards seeing the rebellions as religious the impact on Christians could be severe: provincial governors launched investigations and priests faced execution if they were caught, while lay Christians who refused to renounce their religion were exiled to Xinjiang.

Li had spent his formative years in Europe and was deeply committed to his Christian faith, but he retained a strong sense of Chinese identity and had clearly been greatly impressed by his experiences at the Qing court. This meant that he experienced the tensions facing Chinese Christians personally as he dealt with European missionaries who despised the Chinese and their culture, and Chinese who rejected Christianity as alien to proper Confucian morality. In his early years as a missionary these two poles were represented by his religious superior Cortenova and his cousin Li Jiong.

Cortenova, who was personally cantankerous, was constantly in dispute with the Chinese priests in his vicariate over local customs that he thought were forbidden by the Church (or should be).[29] One irate letter to Rome accuses the local Christians of slander, lying, murder and theft, and says that all they do is fast and recite lots of prayers. He blames this on the fact that they 'praise superstitions as the local practice, and call the keeping of the sabbath a European custom' so that 'one can only

[26] Emmanuele Conforti to Propaganda, 30 Aug. 1799, APF, SOCP 69, pp. 333, 385.

[27] Bernward H. Willeke, *Imperial government and Catholic missions in China during the years 1784–1785*, New York 1948, 46–8; R. G. Tiedemann, 'Christianity and Chinese "heterodox sects": mass conversion and syncretism in Shandong province in the early eighteenth century', *Monumenta Serica* xliv (1996), 339–82.

[28] Wensheng Wang, *White Lotus rebels and South China pirates: crisis and reform in the Qing empire*, Cambridge, Ma–London 2014, 183–4; Zhang Ruilong 張瑞龍, *Tianlijiao shijian yu Qing zhongye de zhengzhi xueshu yu shehui* 天理教事件與清中葉的政治、學術與社會 [The Tianli Sect incident and politics, scholarship and society in the mid-Qing], Beijing 2014, 104–10.

[29] Ioannes Ricci, *Vicariatus Taiyuanfu seu brevis historia antiquae Franciscanae missionis Shansi et Shensi a sua origine ad dies nostros (1700–1928)*, Beijing 1929, 52–3.

hope that the Lord will lay waste the earth and make the earth desolate'.[30] He was particularly offended by Christians who used the Chinese term *sheng*, 'the sage', for Confucius since this term was also used to translate the Christian term 'saint'. As a result, he had taken to asking Chinese Christians whether Confucius was in heaven. When they replied that Confucius had lived before the incarnation, Cortenova would insist that Confucius was in hell (and probably burning in its flames).[31] Cortenova was extreme in his opinions, but the tensions between Chinese and Europeans over cultural differences were real. Li once warned the Chinese in Naples that they should pay attention to their study of moral theology cases because 'the indigenous, or rather Chinese, missionaries up to this point have been ridiculed by the European fathers, as if they were to say: they both went to Europe and returned as animals'.[32]

At the other pole was Li Zibiao's cousin Li Jiong, who broke with the family's Catholic faith to fulfil what he saw as his duties as a filial son for his father's funeral. Li Zichang died in 1803 in Guangdong where he was serving as a naval officer. Li Jiong decided to take his father's coffin back home across China for burial, even though the European missionaries ruled that he must not do this. Li Jiong, however, was said to have responded, 'Alas that the decline of Christianity has come to such a point! Crows disgorge food and otters make sacrifices of fish [to their parents]; how could I be less than a wild animal?'[33] So he took his father's coffin home and buried it with full Confucian sacrifices and rituals. He later made a public retraction of his faith which divided the family, with those who remained Christian breaking off relations with him and his descendants.[34] Like many cases dealt with under Rites Controversy rules specific to China, the dispute was complex in terms of moral theology: postponing burial and transporting the coffin home over a long distance was a common Chinese custom that might be thought to imply excessive concern for one's ancestors and was alien to Europeans, but there was no general Christian rule against it. These tensions were part of Li's lived experience: he had been trained in Europe and was always obedient to his superiors' decisions, but he was also part of a

[30] 'le superstizione si decantano usi del paese, l'osservanza delle feste costume europeo ….. onde altro non puo aspettarsi, che Dominus dissipabit terram et nudabit terram': Giambattista Cortenova to Propaganda, 29 May 1790, APF, SOCP 67, p. 496.

[31] 聖: Cortenova to Propaganda, 14 Sept. 1791, ibid. 68, p. 246.

[32] 'missionarii indigenas sive sinenses hucusque ludibrio fuisse Patribus Europaeis, quasi dicerent, animalia ibant, in Europam, et revertebantur': Ly to the Chinese students of the Naples College, 14 Aug. 1799, ibid. Missioni 53, p. 157.

[33] 耶穌教之敝一至此哉烏脯而獺祭吾豈不禽獸若乎: Pan, *Wuwei qijiu*, iv. 14–15

[34] Cortenova to Propaganda, 1 Sept. 1803, APF, SC, Cina e regni adiacenti 2, p. 142.

Chinese family, which had been split apart by a debatable ruling on Chinese funeral practices.

Meanwhile, Li also saw himself as part of a Church bound together by networks of correspondence and prayer. He wrote regularly to the superiors of the Naples College, the Chinese students there and the Propaganda. His letters constantly reiterate his sense of the power of prayer and his dependence on the prayers being made for him in Europe. This is not just a matter of formulaic requests, but a belief that these prayers are answered. In 1819 when the superior of the college congratulated him that his own mission had not been affected by recent persecutions he responded that, on the contrary, 'I certainly think of that as something summoned by your prayers and those of our whole community in accordance with God's will.'[35] In a letter to the Chinese students he tells them that 'the salvation of souls is obtained more by the exercise of the virtues and especially prayer than by preaching'.[36]

However, this sense of personal and spiritual integration into a worldwide Church did not mean that Li adopted a European rather than Chinese identity. His refusal to blame the Qing state for the various persecutions he was living through is also striking. From 1807 and more strongly after 1813, when the Eight Trigrams sect attempted to assassinate the Jiaqing emperor, there was a series of crackdowns on religious sects. These hit Christians hard and dominated Li's life until Jiaqing's death in 1820, but he was not without sympathy for the Qing policy. He had himself experienced the violence of the White Lotus rebellion in 1798 when he set off to visit his family but had to turn back as the rebels swept down into Shaanxi province. He compared them to Holofernes and pointed out that Christian congregations too suffered and 'everywhere in the land was weeping and desolation'.[37] Nor did Li see the Qing state as inherently hostile to Christianity. At times he even depicted Qing policy as promoting the Church. In 1801, when conversions were spreading in Dunliu county, he attributed this partly to the county magistrate who had refused to hear legal cases against Christians who did not contribute to local temples.[38] This probably reflected a Confucian hostility to folk cults as superstition on the part of the magistrate, but Li depicted an official whose policy supported the Christians and promoted the growth of their community.

[35] 'id certe precibus tuis, et totius nostrae communitatis secundum Deum accesitionem referro': Ly to Naples College, 9 Dec. 1819, AION, 16.1.15.

[36] 'salutem animarum plus exercitio virtutum praesertim orationis, quam praedicationis procurari': Ly to the Chinese students of the Naples College, 9 Sept. 1819, ACGOFM, Missioni 53, p. 179.

[37] 'ubique terrarum esse luctum et desolationem': Ly to the Chinese students of the Naples College, 15 Sept. 1798, ibid. p. 153.

[38] Ly to Propaganda, 20 Dec. 1801, APF, SC, Cina e regni 1a, p. 440.

When crackdowns happened, Li treated them as a particular government policy that might change, rather than as something characteristic of Qing officials let alone Chinese culture more broadly. Even when the Jiaqing emperor issued a specific edict against Christianity in 1808, Li wrote to the Chinese students in Naples, pointing out that there was little church growth 'not obstructed by the decree of the Princes of the infidels, but by lack of faith, which, since it is a gift of God, is rare and difficult'.[39] After the accession of the Daoguang emperor in 1820, he told them that 'The Emperor is neither a persecutor nor supporter of our Holy Religion, but he does not have the power not to abide by the law, which stands like the law of the Medes and the Persians against holy Daniel.'[40] King Darius favoured Daniel, but had to throw him into the lion's den in accordance with a law he had been tricked into making. The reference is striking in the context of the threat to Li and his community: he goes on to say that thirteen Christians have been sent into exile from which they cannot return unless they apostatise.

Not only did Li not blame the Qing state for persecutions or the lack of conversions, but he hardly ever mentions Chinese culture or customs and their relationship to Christianity. The only time he explicitly addresses this issue is in an 1810 letter to the Chinese students where he tells them that although Christians are not persecuted they cannot practise publicly. This is because 'the Chinese nation is so firmly attached to its ancient past' that no religion is recognised as legitimate except Buddhism 'to which the imperial family is much attached and other superstitions which are tolerated because the common people are ignorant and accustomed to them but are not actually legally acknowledged. This is the origin of the low opinion of religion in this nation, and why there is almost no admiration for it'.[41] This statement was no doubt influenced by his experiences at court where he had seen the Qianlong emperor set off for his prayers and attended as interpreter as Macartney was taken on a tour of the spectacular Buddhist temples.[42] The result is an image not of cultural

[39] 'Non decretum Principum infidelium impediente, sed defectu fidei, quae cum sit donum Dei, rara est et difficilis': Ly to the Chinese students of the Naples College, 24 Oct. 1808, ACGOFM, Missioni 53, p. 167.

[40] 'Imperator nec persecutor nec fautor nostrae S. Religionis tamen sui juris non est juri non stare, sicut lex Persarum et Medorum contra S. Dinielem': Ly to the Chinese students of the Naples College, 18 Sept. 1826, ibid. p. 182.

[41] 'sinica natio adeo tenax est suae antiquitatis .... [religiones Bontiorum et Lama] quibus addicta est familia imperialis, caeteraeque superstitiosae ad consuetutidinem et ignorantiam vulgi tollerantur, non vero uti lege adprobatae habentur. Hinc apud hanc nationem vilis est opinio religionis, ejusque aemulatio fere sit nulla': Ly to the Chinese students of the Naples College, 2 Oct. 1810, ibid. pp. 170–1.

[42] George Thomas Staunton diary, George Thomas Staunton collection, Duke University Library, entries for 15, 17 Sept. 1793; J. C. Hüttner, *Voyage a la Chine*, Paris 1798, 112–17.

difference and persecution but of indifference and secularism, an accusation also made against elite Europeans.

Li's refusal to condemn Chinese culture is also suggested by his acceptance of the repurposing of one of the few Christian buildings in his mission as a Confucian shrine. This took place in Zhaojialing, a remote village in the hills where Li lived during the most intense periods of persecution. The building concerned was a brick-fronted cave, which appears to have originally been used as a Confucian shrine. Southern Shanxi has a tradition of village Confucian shrines dating back to the eleventh century when the philosopher Cheng Hao promoted rural schools in the area. The teaching in these schools tended to disappear over time, leaving buildings which were often co-opted by other religious groups.[43] This seems to have been what had occurred in Zhaojialing where the transformation would have been easier because of the strong association between Christianity and Confucianism that persisted from Vagnone's early conversions. In 1826 local officials, who were often active in promoting these Confucian shrines and were conducting a renewed crackdown against White Lotus groups, visited and carried off the stations of the cross. Li explained to the students in Naples that the villagers had put back the tablet of Confucius for a while 'not from hatred of our religion but lest they themselves should be in danger of being condemned'.[44] His description expresses disappointment but not horror: a tablet to Confucius in a Christian chapel was not the way things should be, but it was also an understandable temporary adjustment under the circumstances.

The rulings of the Rites Controversy, however, embedded a sense of cultural difference in the Church's theology of mission in China which contributed to the state persecutions that followed. Li's correspondence suggests that he dealt with these difficult circumstances using recent developments in moral theology in Naples. His training there had presented him not with a static Counter-Reformation Catholicism but with constant debate as both Church and society responded to the dramatic intellectual, political and social changes that were taking place. The theology course at the Naples College focused on moral theology which was taught as casuistry: students were given a moral dilemma to analyse and solve using the

[43] Hao Ping 郝平 and Wei Chunyang 魏春羊, 'Ruxue de xiangcun shentou: yi Song zhi Qing Shanxi xiangcun wenmiao wei zhongxin' 儒學的鄉村滲透:以宋至清山西鄉村文廟為中心 [The dissemination of Confucianism into the countryside, focusing on Shanxi village Confucian temples from the Song to Qing dynasty], *Hubei daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 湖北大學學報 (哲學社會科學版) [Journal of Hubei University (philosophy and social science)] xlix (2022), 55–66.

[44] 'non in odium nostrae Religionis sed ne ipsi periculum damnationis subirent': Ly to the Chinese students of the Naples College, 18 Sept. 1826, ACGOFM, Missioni 53, p. 182. See also Alfonso de Donato to Propaganda, 30 Oct. 1841, APF, SC, Cina e regni 10, pp. 306, 312; *Elenchus alumnorum,* 4.

Bible, other authorities and comparisons with previous recorded cases. The complexity of the rules for China meant that this was seen as particularly important for the Chinese students and even after they had been ordained they continued to do regular exercises.[45]

Ripa's rules said that the students should avoid contemporary debates in moral theology.[46] However, this was a highly contested field and among the most important new ideas were those of Alfonso de Liguori, who happened also to be a founding member of the college. De Liguori had begun his career as a lawyer then entered the priesthood, joining the first Chinese students in Ripa's new college to prepare to go as a missionary to China. When his interests shifted to evangelising the rural areas around Naples, he left to found his own religious order, the Redemptorists, but maintained good relations with Ripa.[47] With his training as a lawyer, he also wrote an immensely influential textbook on moral theology, which took a position between the flexibility for which the Jesuits had been much criticised (probabilism) and recent stricter approaches focused on avoiding any possibility of sin (rigorism). De Liguori allowed the confessor to consider competing authorities and emphasised the importance of the sacraments, arguing that the confessor should not unnecessarily deprive someone of access to them since that might cause immorality. This more generous approach to confession and moral problems rapidly became the new orthodoxy in Italy and was foundational in shaping many aspects of Italian popular Catholicism.[48]

In Italy de Liguori's ideas were enacted through the missions to the poor that the Redemptorists ran and which the Chinese students sometimes attended.[49] Such missions were understood in much the same terms as mission to the world beyond Europe: published accounts by the Jesuits even refer to Italian villages as the Indies. The priests leading them would travel to villages where they would organise eight to ten days of intense religious activities: preaching, processions, teaching and spiritual exercises. These would climax in the local people making a full confession and receiving the eucharist. New devotional groups would be established and the missionaries would return to the same villages over many

[45] Gennaro Fatigati, 31 Mar. 1781, APF, SC, Collegi vari 11, pp. 92–5: Stato di signori alunni cinesi del 1782, ibid. 11, p. 147.

[46] Fatica and D'Arelli, *La missione cattolica*, 228.

[47] Ripa, *Storia della fondazione*, iii. 8–14; Antonio Tannoja, *The life of St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori, bishop of St Agatha of the Goths and founder of the Congregation of the Holy Redeemer*, Baltimore, MD 1855, 20, 37.

[48] Michael Printy, 'The intellectual origins of popular Catholicism: Catholic moral theology in the age of enlightenment', *Catholic Historical Review* xci (2005), 438–61.

[49] Giacomo Di Fiore, *Lettere di missionari dalla Cina (1761–1775): la vita quotidiana nelle missioni attraverso il carteggio di Emiliano Palladini e Filippo Huang con il Collegio dei Cinesi in Napoli*, Naples 1995, 149–50.

years.[50] The new moral theology was spread as people were prepared to make their confessions, and watched as others were reconciled to those they had wronged in dramatic public acts.

In this context mission was not just something done by Europeans to non-Europeans, but rather an activity to which priests were called across the world. It occupied most of Li's time in Shanxi as he toured the Christian communities he was responsible for in a circuit that took three years to complete. Like the Redemptorists in Italy, he would teach, urge people to turn away from customs condemned by the Church, hear the confessions of the community, establish confraternities to promote prayer and devotions and offer the eucharist.[51] These missions were also the context for his evangelism. In 1801 he successfully established a new Christian community, baptising a hundred families during a month-long mission. When he wrote to Rome he explained that this had occurred because

> Only now after all this time in this region in the souls of the faithful, and equally of the infidel, a certain gift of pressing towards God is clearly seen. Either it is cleansed by the passage of time, or rather by contact with [Christian] customs, and they devote themselves all the more sincerely to pious works and to seeking more keenly the rewards of their eternal salvation. Or rather their minds spurn false superstition and take refuge in the light of the gospel, and lavishly cultivate that light they have seen and thoroughly digest it in their minds.[52]

It is striking that he sees both Christians and non-Christians being moved to seek salvation. He goes on to describe how the heads of families who have been baptised eagerly seek to convert their family members.[53] The process of mission is the same as that being conducted in Europe and there is no

[50] David Gentilcore, '"Adapt yourselves to the people's capabilities": missionary strategies, methods and impact in the Kingdom of Naples, 1600–1800', this JOURNAL xlv (1994), 269–96; Louis Châtellier, *The religion of the poor: rural missions in Europe and the formation of modern Catholicism,* c. *1500*–c. *1800,* trans. Brian Pearce, Cambridge 1997, 187–94, 200–5.

[51] Ly to the Chinese students of the Naples College, 24 Oct. 1808, ACGOFM, Missioni 53, p. 167; Gabriele Grioglio, 10 May 1851, APF, SC, Cina e regni 14, pp. 275–6; 'The report of the apostolic visitation of D. Emmanuele Conforti on the Franciscan missions in Shansi, Shensi and Kansu (1798)', ed. Bernward H. Willeke, *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* lxxxiv (1991), 197–271 (Li used the surname May).

[52] 'Vix tandem hac in regione animis fidelium, juxta ac infidelium virtus quaedam Dei insistere non obscure consipictur, vel expurgatur vetustate, sive potius contagione consuetudinis sincerius piis operibus incumbere, aeternae suae salutis emolumenta avidius adpetere, vel aspernatos superstitiosam falsitatem ad lucem Evangelicam animos e confugere, eamque perceptam impense colere, suorumque animis sedulo ingenere': Ly to Propaganda, 20 Dec. 1801, APF, SC Cina e regni 1a, p. 440.

[53] Ibid.

boundary between Europeans and Chinese as either the disseminators or receivers of Christianity.

These missions were also opportunities for moral teaching around the sacrament of confession. The complex rules imposed as a result of the bull *Ex quo singulari* could affect Catholics' daily lives in quite extreme ways if strictly enforced, and were thus highly contested. Clergy like Cortenova had penalised members of the (small) Christian communities for marrying their children to non-Christians, or prostrating themselves at their parents' funerals, or working on Sundays (following patterns of labour that were unavoidable for all but the wealthiest), or sending their children to school (where they would be required to honour Confucius).[54] Li's response was not to reject the rulings but a gradual process of education similar to that used by the Redemptorists in Italy. Towards the end of his life, he wrote to a close friend in Europe with satisfaction:

> Nor are there fewer divine blessings for the Christians, among whom superstitions have been eradicated, not only those that were banned in the bull *Ex Quo* but also other smaller ones known in the course of time but perhaps still unknown in Europe, and thus there is uncommon subjection and obedience to everything that is proposed by the missionaries making enquiries, even if it contradicts the customs of the region and destroys the old errors that once captured them, and there are absolutely none found among them who dare to publicly contradict, act in opposition to, or oppose the dignity and authority of the Church.[55]

This was also the approach Li took to the most difficult moral cases that faced the community, those relating to apostasy in the face of state persecution. Here the moral theology he had learned in Naples was not just an intellectual exercise, but a tool allowing the communities that he was guiding to survive the persecutions and their aftermath. The threats were severe: Li's letters to the Chinese students in Naples remind them that 'To live is Christ, to die is gain', though he adds more encouragingly that because people are energetic in getting themselves out of trouble many manage to get away.[56] It was, in fact, difficult for Qing officials to

[54] Indie Orientali Cina Pekino ristretto, 1803, APF, SOCP 70, p. 111; Francesco Maria De Dervio, 11 Oct. 1780, ibid. 62, p. 719.

[55] 'nec minus divini beneficii in Christianos, apud quos extinctis superstitionibus, non modo quae in bulla Ex quo prohibentur, sed etiam minunioris aliis cursu temporis cognitis in Europa forte adhuc ignotis, non vulgaris reperitur subjectio et obedientia ad omnia quaeriscis proponuntur a Missionariis quamvis contraria regionis consuetudini, destructiva antiqui erroris, qui eos captivabat, nec omnino reperitur inter eos qui publice audere contradicere, refragari, aut adversari dignitatem, et auctoritatem Ecclesiasticam': Ly to Ioannia Borgia, 10 Sept. 1826, AION 16.1.15.

[56] Ly to the Chinese students of the Naples College, 26 Sept. 1815, ACGOFM, Missioni 53, p. 173.

distinguish Chinese priests from lay Christians, who were supposed to be offered a choice between renouncing their religion and going into exile, so not all priests who were captured were executed. However, penal exile thousands of miles away in Xinjiang was itself a harsh penalty and the choices faced by lay Christians were extremely difficult. People's responses were often complex and ambiguous. Some simply ceased practising their faith, without actually renouncing it, in order to escape attention. Of those who were arrested and taken to court some did renounce their faith while others managed to avoid this but somehow also avoided being sent into exile. Yet others were sent to Xinjiang but were then said to have renounced the faith or paid bribes once they arrived to reduce the terms of their sentences.[57]

Li's letters emphasise the complexity of the moral choices and suggest that he took a relatively generous line in accepting those who wished to return to the Church and to the sacraments. In 1815 he received from the Chinese students in Naples a copy of the writings of Callistus, a second-century pope who lived in a time of persecutions and took a generous line in debates on the readmission to the Church of those who had committed the most serious sins, which included apostasy.[58] His position is now known mainly because of a ferocious attack by Tertullian, whose opinions were more severe, but Li was more likely thinking of Pietro Moretti's hagiographic study published in Rome in 1752. This was precisely the sort of up-to-date, learned history of the Early Church that was taught in the Naples College. Moretti honoured Callistus as a pope, martyr, miracle worker and the founder of the great basilica in Trastevere. He avoided the subject of Tertullian's attack, but mentioned the debates and printed and authenticated a letter in which Callistus set out his approach towards those who had been excommunicated for serious sin.[59] Li had no access to European books in Shanxi, so presumably he had asked the Chinese students to find this letter and copy it for him. The implication is that he was looking to readmit Christians to the Church and to do so in ways that would incorporate them fully into the community. After the death of the Jiaqing emperor, he wrote with satisfaction that the number of Christians had not been reduced by the persecutions but that those who had apostatised in the courts had later performed public penitence and confessed with a contrite

[57] Ly to Propaganda, 28 Oct. 1808, APF, SC Cina e regni 3, p. 600; Articulo di una lettera del Signor D. Giacomo Li, 15 Sept. 1814, ibid. 4, p. 365; Ly to Propaganda, 22 Nov. 1816, APF, SOCP 72, p. 315.

[58] Ly to the Chinese students of the Naples College, 26 Sept. 1815, ACGOFM, Missioni 53, p. 174; Eric Osborn, *Tertullian: first theologian of the West*, Cambridge 1997, 171–6.

[59] Petrus Morettus, *De S. Callisto PP. et M. ejusque Basilica S. Mariae trans Tiberim nuncupate disquisitions duae critic-historicae*, Rome 1752, i. 55–9; Cappello, *Hieropaedia catholica*.

heart. This suggests that he had developed a means of publicly reconciling to the rest of the community those who had denied the faith. He was also pleased to point out to the Propaganda that while there was weakness in faith, inconstancy of spirit and timidity, 'spontaneous or intellectual apostasy is in fact either non-existent or extremely rare'.[60] The satisfactory contrast between China, where Christians were returning to the faith after state persecution, and Europe, where intellectual apostasy was a significant issue, is unstated but clearly implied.

Li's use of casuistry, which put the Church universal, rather than cultural difference, at the centre of his understanding of persecution, is characteristic of his thinking more broadly. Instead of describing the suffering of the Church in China through a framework of national or political differences he put it in the context of the attacks on the papacy and the broader Catholic Church by the French revolutionary forces of Napoleon. His letters are full of references to 'the calamity of the times' making correspondence difficult and this applies indiscriminately to events in China and Europe.[61] In 1811, writing to the Propaganda, he hopes that the pope will be able to return to Rome and regain his temporal powers, then adds: 'We missionaries in these gentile lands are tossed to the gates of hell as if by waves striking this mission of ours from every side.'[62] Again the Qing persecutions in China are understood as being part of the same threats that face the Church in revolutionary Europe.

Over time Li's idea of the Church in Europe and China facing problems that differed in their specifics, but not in their nature, developed into a vision of the Church militant engaged in a cosmic war against Satan. This language appears to have first reached Li from the superiors of the Naples College, who had lived through the expulsion of the pope from Rome, republican revolution and French occupation. In 1819 the expulsion of one of the Chinese students was the last straw for the college's superior, who wrote to Li, 'Alas! What afflictions and calamities he brought on this congregation!'[63] He then called on Li to be 'a good soldier in Christ'.[64] Li adopted the same language, writing to Rome a few years later that it was still not possible:

> for the dangers facing missionaries not to be feared or that the army of Christians should progress in safety, since the enemy of the human race exerts all his infernal

[60] 'Spontanea vero sive intellectualis apostasia vel nulla vel rarissima est': Ly to Propaganda, 8 Sept. 1821, APF, SC, Cina e regni 5, p. 151.

[61] 'Calamitas temporis': Ly to Propaganda, 25 Feb. 1802, ibid. 1a, p. 315.

[62] 'Missionarii, qui sumus in his terris gentilium haud multo absimilibus fluctibus jactamur porta inferi undique hanc nostram missionem concutiente': Ly to Propaganda, 29 Oct. 1811, ibid. 3, p. 871.

[63] 'Heu quot aerumnas, calamitatesque huic Congregationi attulit!': Naples College to Ly, 7 Jan. 1819, AION 1.1.3.

[64] 'bonus miles Christi': Naples College to Ly, 7 Jan. 1819, ibid.

attempts and all his force as he does everywhere, but much more in these lands of the infidel to blind their eyes lest they should come to knowledge of the truth through the dawning light of the gospel.[65]

In another letter, written on the same day, he used almost the same words but continued the images with Satan working 'for the devastation of the Christians'.[66] The Latin term he uses here refers to destruction inflicted in battle. Such imagery of the Church militant is often associated with European imperialism and the missionaries of the late nineteenth century. An 1884 ordination sermon given for a French missionary who later worked in Shanxi described China as 'the land of all errors and all cruelties' and the priest as 'the soldier, the knight of Christ, the enemy of all those who make war on Christ and would destroy his empire over the world and over souls'.[67] Here the Christian missionary and European imperialist military action against China are almost indistinguishable. Li's rhetoric of cosmic battle and the Church militant, by contrast, emphasises similarity rather than difference across cultures and deflects onto Satan condemnation that might otherwise be made of China or the Qing state. Persecution becomes part of a cosmic battle against Satan who is working his own ends in both Europe and China, which is attacked only because of its potential for conversion.[68]

In 1817, when the Propaganda suggested consecrating Chinese priests as bishops, Li was the only one actually named in the formal proposal.[69] When he died in 1826 Giovacchino Salvetti, the vicar apostolic who had put his name forward, wrote that 'Signor Giacomo was the one who had the best basis of all in both ability and theory' and lamented how much he missed spending time with him and being able to discuss problems with him.[70] A few years later another Chinese priest, Wang Zhenting (Paulus Vam Minor), wrote how pleased he was to hear that one of the

[65] 'ut pericula missionariorum non timeantur, et exercitia Christianorum tute peragantur, hostis enim humani generis omnes conatus infernales, omnemque exevit vim sicut ubique, multo magis in his terris infidelium ad excaecandos oculos eorum, ne exorta luce Evangelii ad cognitionem veritatis perveniant': Ly to Propaganda, 10 Sept. 1826, APF, SC, Cina e regni 6, p. 310.

[66] 'ad stragem Christianorum': Ly to Naples College, 10 Sept. 1826, AION 16.1.15.

[67] 'la Chine, pays de toutes les erreurs et de toutes les cruautés' and 'Le prêtre est le soldat, le chevalier du Christ, l'adversaire de tous ceux qui font la guerre au Christ et voudraient détruire son empire dans le monde et dans les âmes': Léon de Kerval, *Deux Martyrs français de l'ordre des Frères mineurs: le R.P. Théodoric Balat et le Fr. André Bauer, massacres en Chine le 9 juillet 1900*, Rome 1903, 105.

[68] cf. Ruth Marshall, 'Destroying arguments and captivating thoughts: spiritual warfare as global praxis', *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* ii (2016), 92–113.

[69] Grioglio to Propaganda, 10 May 1851, APF, SOCP 73, p. 76.

[70] 'Signore Giacomo, è quello, che nella capicità, e teorica era il piu fondato d'ogni altro': Giovacchino Salvetti to Propaganda, 28 Oct. 1828, APF, SC, Cina 6, p. 659.

younger generation of Chinese students was making good progress because there had been no theologian since Li's death.[71]

Li's ideas were never written down systematically or published in Chinese, but later missionaries reported the influence of the devotional communities he founded on the practices of Catholic congregations in southern Shanxi.[72] Moreover, Salvetti, the vicar apostolic, looked to him for advice and as well as teaching the next generation of Chinese priests in the diocesan seminary, Li wrote many of the letters discussed here to the Chinese students training in Naples. It is even possible that his influence might have spread to the new generation of Protestant Chinese leaders. When Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary, arrived in China his patron was George Staunton, who knew Li from the Macartney embassy, and recommended Abel Yun, a Latin-speaking Catholic from Shanxi, as his language teacher.[73] The first real expansion of Protestant conversions in Shanxi, which took place in the 1880s and was led by Xi Shengmo (Pastor Hsi), began in Hongdong county, one of Li's bases on his annual missions; one of its other senior leaders had previously been Catholic.[74] Chen Guodi (Louis Tcheng), one of the Chinese bishops ordained in 1926, whose story is often overlooked in narratives focused on Lebbe, came from a family that had been Catholic since Li's time and lived in Anyang village, easy walking distance from the village of Machang which was Li's base when he was not on his missions or in hiding.[75]

Li's sense of the Church universal bound together by prayer, his generous interpretation of moral theology and his developing sense of a cosmic Church militant, were indeed orthodox and very much of his time. However, they also suggest the development of a distinctively Chinese set of ideas within the global Church that emphasised similarities between China and Europe and the Church as a universal institution in which all share equally. Rather than seeing the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a gap in theological development between Jesuit accommodation and twentieth-century Protestant contextual theology, Li's correspondence suggests that theological thinking developed and passed down within the Chinese clergy.[76] De Liguori's ideas have been seen as shaping Italian

[71] Paulus Vam Minor to the Chinese students of the Naples College, 19 Sept. 1832, ACGOFM, Missioni 53, p. 204.

[72] Grioglio to Propaganda, 10 May 1851, APF, SC, Cina e regni 14, pp. 275–6.

[73] Robert Morrison and Eliza A. Morrison, *Memoirs of the life and labours of Robert Morrison D.D.*, London 1839, 168.

[74] Mrs Howard Taylor (*née* Geraldine Guinness), *Pastor Hsi (of north China): one of China's Christians*, London 1903, 49–51, 105, 113.

[75] *Tianzhujiao Changzhi jiaoqu jianshi* 天主教長治教區簡史 [A brief history of Changzhi Catholic diocese], Changzhi 1997, 73.

[76] For Machang 馬場 [Horse Square] see William Hinton, *Shenfan*, New York 1983, 279–82. For Zhaojialing see 'Zhaojialing shengmutang jianjie – zhuanzhi Li Yaping

rural Catholicism long after his death, so also in Li's writings it is possible to sense the contours of a transition from early modern European debates over how to respond to other cultures to the rural Catholicism of north China that continues today. That Catholicism is striking both for its strong sense of unity with the worldwide Church and its equally strong commitment to traditional Chinese cultural practices.

boke' 趙家嶺聖母堂簡介–轉至李亞平博客 [A brief introduction to Zhaojialing Marian Shrine – from Li Yaping's blog], 2013 (Tianzhujiao Changzhi jiaoqu wang 天主教長治教區網, <czjq.sxgds.cn>, accessed 7 Apr. 2023).