Christianity and Cultures
Japan & China in Comparison
1543-1644

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RITUAL AGENCY AND INTERPRETIVE PARADIGMS OF RITUALITY IN THE JAPANESE AND CHINESE MISSIONS

Christian liturgical adaptation to local conditions and the missionary interpretation of native rituals are two linked phenomena that characterized both the Japanese and Chinese missions. Adaptations in the performance of the Christian sacraments and in devotional life were responses to pre-existing native understandings of the meaning of ritual postures or behaviors within local cultures. For example, Chinese literati considered it disrespectful to attend a ceremony or face a superior bare-headed. Thus, in China the missionaries allowed men to attend the Mass wearing their hats, against the European practice. In Japan, the Jesuits studied the religious and ritual practices of Buddhist monks and consciously imitated their behavior to gain the respect of the Japanese. The essays by Kataoka and Asami naturally invite a connection between Christian liturgical adaptation on the one hand, and knowledge of native rituals to set policy and solve theological controversies on the other hand.

We now know a good deal about liturgical adaptation and Christian ritual in the Japan mission, in particular thanks to the research in Jesuit primary sources by Jesús López-Gay. Recent work conducted on the ritual life in the Chinese communities of the late Ming and early Qing Periods has also advanced our understanding of Christian ritual adaptation there, especially in the area of penitential and funerary practices.

One question that remains to a large extent open, and that both historians of the Chinese and Japanese missions have been struggling to answer is the role of native Christians in this adaptation, or, in other words, their 'ritual agency'. In Japan, for example, who stimulated the adaptation? Was it a conscious Jesuit policy? Was it due to the opinions and requests of Japanese converts and catechists? Or was it simply a practical and piecemeal response to local cultural forms by the missionaries? López-Gay concludes that in the first thirty years of the Japan mission,
‘due to a lack of theological and practical planning, [...] liturgical adaptation was imposed by external circumstances rather than being the result of a conscious initiative or theological reflection.’ He also mentions early modern missionaries as saying that ‘for the conversion of Japan, we need a new theology.’ At the same time, missionaries were convinced that ‘once Christianity would be solidly established, all, or almost all the elements coming from old Europe would be introduced.’

A way to turn away from this relatively negative image of a tentative and faulty clergy-driven adaptation of the liturgy in response to external circumstances would be to reconstruct the mostly silent, yet crucial pressure exerted on the missionaries by the social context and the agency of Japanese converts. Kataoka’s essay suggests that a careful evaluation of elements of artistic and visual culture of Christian Japan, in addition to reliance on primary sources documenting the prescriptive urge of the clergy, can help us gain a better understanding of liturgical adaptation from the perspective of the Japanese actors. To closely observe the interactions of lay catechists and assistants, such as the dōjuku and kambō, but also of the power-holders, such as daimyo and samurai, with the Jesuit missionaries would also be a good method to reconstruct the native contribution.

Scholars in the end face a methodological issue: how do we read sources mostly produced by missionaries to recover the voice of native Christians? Recent research on the Chinese Christian communities shows that the recovery of the Christians’ role in liturgical adaptation becomes more fruitful through analysis of narratives on religious life rather than the reading of prescriptive texts, although subtle adaptation can be detected even there. Prime examples of these narrative sources are the annual reports of the mission (Litterae Annuae) with their rich description of miracles and rituals, and missionary correspondence on daily matters, reflecting what Kataoka calls the ‘practice of faith’. An examination of the regulations issued by missionaries to legislate or forbid current practices is also a way to know what truly was happening, and whether these practices went against the European model imposed from above. However, not all rituals are equally promising targets for recovering native agency. Missionaries simply considered some rituals as inviolable. Especially when

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2 Idem, p. 297.
3 Idem, p. 297.
Theological debates in early modern times were often a way to fight political battles. An historical analysis of the theological environment of late sixteenth century Spain, of the ecclesiastical politics of Manila in the 1640s, and of the European networks that rejected Rubino’s work in the 1670s and 1680s would help us trace the political reasons behind these shifts on the theological terrain. The changing political climate mattered most in judging the rituals of China, and theology became a pliable tool in the hands of the opposing parties and their patrons within the Church and the Catholic states vying for influence in Europe and in Asia.

In conclusion, a better understanding of the unique nature of Christian liturgy and rituals in the Chinese and Japanese missions depends on a deeper probing of native contributions. These contributions could be direct, as when local Christians suggested Christian adaptations to native traditions, or indirect, as when a native interpretation of rituals informed pastoral policies and theological interpretations. Scholars might need to look at old evidence with fresh eyes, and ask new questions.

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