



Joan Blaeu (ca 1596–1673), Detail from *Asia noviter delineata*, 1660  
(ARSI, Fondo Cartine Geografiche)

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VOLUME 68

# CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURES

## JAPAN & CHINA IN COMPARISON

### 1543-1644

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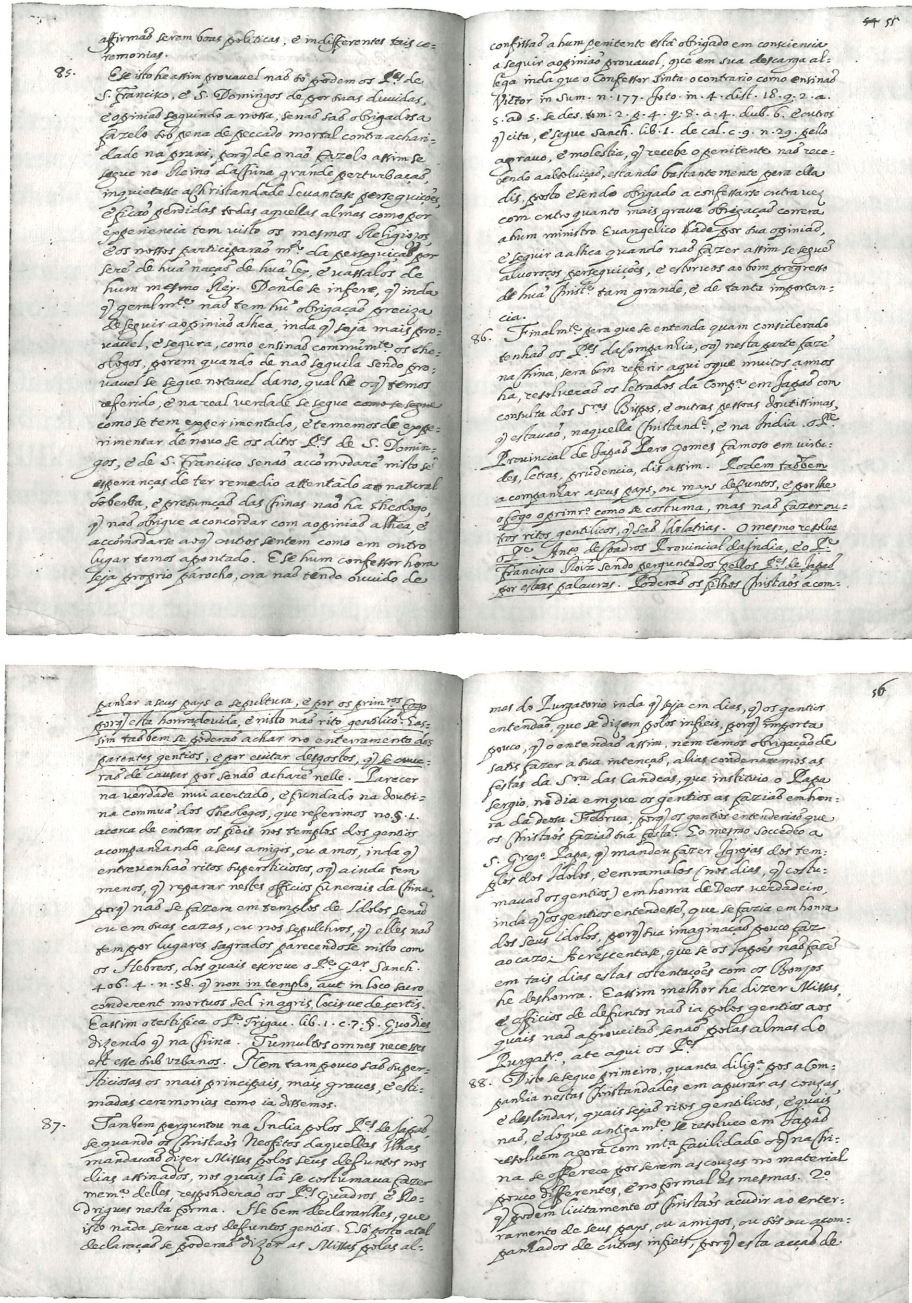


Figure 29

Antonio Rubino, S.J. and Diego Morales, S.J., Resposta às calúmnias que os Padres de S. Domingos e de S. Francisco impoem aos Padres da Companhia de Jesus que se occupão na conversão do Reino da China (1641), ARSI, Jap.-Sin., 155, ff. 54<sup>v</sup>-56<sup>r</sup>

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RESPONSES & REFLECTIONS

EUGENIO MENEGON

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.'<sup>1</sup> He also mentions early modern missionaries as saying that 'for the conversion of Japan, we need a new theology.'<sup>2</sup> 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.'<sup>3</sup>

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 *kanbō*, 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

<sup>1</sup> Jesús López-Gay, *La liturgia en la misión del Japón del siglo XVI* (Rome: Libreria dell'Università Gregoriana, 1970), p. 296.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p. 297.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p. 297.

priestly presence was necessary, such as in the Mass and in confession, very little adaptation appears in prescriptive texts. We might find some adaptations in matters not directly pertaining to the liturgy: for example, as I mentioned, men attended Mass wearing hats, a sign of respect in China unlike in Europe; or priests and lay catechists offered oral instructions in vernacular at the beginning of the Mass. But not much else. It is in rituals that were seen as 'localized' in Europe, and that were less subject to the push for uniformity of the Council of Trent, such as funerals, that we detect more interesting experimentations. The great importance given to funerals in Chinese culture, and the fact that in the Christian tradition priestly presence was not necessary for burials, encouraged the creation of a Chinese-Christian ritual for the dead that took specific forms based on pre-existing local rituals in certain regions of China. The world of devotion and extra-sacramental practices is the field to mine in order to recover native expressions of Christian ritual life, both in China and Japan.

The recovery of native agency in ritual also depends on the disciplinary habits of the researcher. An historian of early modern Europe looking at China can be tempted to see in the actions of the Jesuits that 'reform of popular culture and religion' going on in the countryside of Europe at the hands of state and church described by many scholars since Peter Burke first proposed the concept. A scholar of Chinese or Japanese culture and religion, on the other hand, might be more inclined to detect native elements and innovations in liturgy.

Disciplinary habits, however, are not only a problem of the modern researcher. Early modern missionaries who tried to understand native rituals and religions, and who used that knowledge to adapt Christian liturgy or to solve pastoral and theological problems, were also heavily influenced by the mental habits of their times. Asami's essay examines how theological interpretations of Japanese religion traveled in time and space to influence not only the Japan mission, but also the Chinese mission. In 1596, Gabriel Vázquez (1549-1604), a famous Jesuit theologian at Alcalá (Spain), offered a pronouncement on idol worship in Japan entitled 'On the cult of idols and on superstitions' at the solicitation of Alessandro Valignano. This essay was later used by the Italian Jesuit Antonio Rubino in a famous and controversial treatise *Reply to the Calumnies of the Fathers of Saint Dominic and Saint Francis* [...], written in 1641 in Manila to counteract the initial salvo of accusations by the Philippine friars against Jesuit practices in China. Asami traces some of Rubino's points on Chinese rituals to earlier pronouncements on Japanese religion by the Goa

Jesuit theologian Francisco Rodrigues in 1570, and to Vázquez's resolution of moral cases in response. Thus, in circuitous ways, the Japanese religious situation, mainly relating to Buddhism, was later used to discuss 'Confucian' rituals in China, and exchanges dating back to the 1570s and 1590s in Japan ended up influencing the debate of the notorious Chinese Rites Controversy decades later. Rubino, however, had no direct knowledge of China, and made his points in defense of Matteo Ricci's policies using a medley of theological propositions, casuistry and historical analogies. In the words of Paul Rule, Rubino's defense shows the 'increasing remoteness of the controversy from Chinese reality'.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Rubino's *Reply* was censored and provoked strong reactions, greatly damaging the Jesuit position on the Chinese rites. First published in Italian in 1665, Rubino's essay was condemned by Propaganda Fide in 1678, and put on the *Index of Forbidden Books* in 1680. In the divisive atmosphere following the publication of the anti-Jesuit diatribe by the Dominican Domingo Navarrete's *Tratados* in Madrid in 1675, Rubino's casuistic defense of the Jesuit position on a host of issues, including the Chinese Rites, became heretical.

The story of these acrimonious theological debates offers a salutary lesson: when judging the rituals and customs of a country, it is essential to pay attention to native interpretations, rather than apply one's theological presuppositions. Only a full understanding of what a ritual does in a certain cultural context reveals its true import, and offers viable ways to adaptation.

Did writings by European theologians reflect an accurate understanding of Japanese and especially Chinese rituality, and of the situation on the ground? Unfortunately, we rarely find traces of Chinese native voices giving a local interpretation in the early debates over Chinese rituals. While the cases presented by Valignano and solved by Vázquez were at least a reflection of Japanese religious and social life, when employed by Rubino to judge China they became irrelevant, and no doubt counterproductive. This casts a doubt on the opportunity to offer universal resolutions of theological and moral cases across cultures. Valignano himself observed that a Portuguese theologian would be hard pressed to give the same solution to a moral case in Lisbon and in Rome. How much more difficult to do that for Japan, where customs are so different! - he commented.

<sup>4</sup> See Paul Rule, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius? The Jesuit Interpretation of Confucianism* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), pp. 92-3.

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.