

Premise

This paper was written long ago, when I was a first-year student in the MA Program in Asian Studies at the University of California at Berkeley (USA), for the course Chinese 232, taught by Dr. Martin Backstrom in Fall 1992. Hoping it might still be useful to interested readers, and for lack of time to do further research amid other duties, I offer it here in its original form, except for some re-formatting, corrections of typos and factual errors, but without considering the scholarship published since the early 1990s. I discussed some of its contents in San Francisco in 1992 with the late Professor Erik Zürcher (Leiden University), and later on shared a copy with Prof. Benjamin Elman (UCLA), 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.

To readers today, I would only recommend a recent study on a similar topic: Roberta Tontini, *Muslim Sanzijing: Shifts and Continuities in the Definition of Islam in China*. Brill, 2016.

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THE CATHOLIC FOUR-CHARACTER CLASSIC (*TIANZHU SHENGJIAO SIZIJING* 天主聖教四字經):

A CONFUCIAN PATTERN TO SPREAD A FOREIGN FAITH IN LATE MING CHINA

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Introduction

In the last decade a certain number of writings on the Jesuit interpretation of Confucianism and on the Jesuit use of Confucian forms to propagate the Christian faith has appeared.¹ To my knowledge, in none of these works the catechetical methods used by the Jesuits to teach the basic tenets of the Catholic faith to the new converts have been analyzed in some depth.² Much instead has been written on the philosophical discussions between the early missionaries and some Chinese literati. The most famous “catechism,” *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (Tianzhu shiyi)* by Matteo Ricci, is in reality a philosophical dialogue between a fictitious Western sage and a Chinese one, and it can hardly be considered a catechism. It has been rightly defined an attempt to a “pre-evangelical” dialogue.³

The generation of missionaries which followed Ricci’s method after his death, continued to work among the literati, producing a variety of religious and scientific treatises. However, once again their language was more apt to a cultivated public than to the almost illiterate masses. One of the most active missionaries in Zhejiang and Fujian between 1620 and the fall of the Ming dynasty was certainly Fr. Giulio Aleni, an Italian Jesuit. He was not only interested in converting the literati, but tried also, 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 brief booklet entitled *The Four-Character Classic of the Holy Religion of the Lord of Heaven (Tianzhu Shengjiao Sizijing)*, original ed. 1642; revised 1653 edition). For whom was this Christian primer written? How was it used in everyday religious education? These are questions I will try to answer in the following pages.

There was a long tradition in the writing of primers in China. The tradition 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 on the younger generations, which were learning the written language as a first step towards the imperial examination and the official career, or more simply were doing so for practical purposes.

¹ The most authoritative study on the Jesuit interpretation of Confucianism is Paul Rule’s *K’ung-Tzu or Confucius? The Jesuit Interpretation of Confucianism*, Sydney, Unwin and Allen, 1988.

² Some scattered comments are to be found in Jacques Gernet’s *Chine et christianisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1982, chapt. 2, “Attitudes religieuses et phénomènes d’assimilation - Gens du peuple,” pp. 113-142.

³ The first “real” Catholic catechism is Michele Ruggieri’s *Tianzhu shilu* (1582), where the Jesuits called themselves “Bonzes from India” (*Tianzhuguo seng*); see Pasquale 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 D’Elia, *op.cit.*, vol. 1, p. 384, note a).

What it is interesting is the use that of this educational form made some “heterodox” groups, like Christians, Muslims and the Taiping rebels.

I will try to show how these different groups used the primer format to transmit different ideological contents. A comparison of the aforementioned Catholic primer, of the Muslim *Tianfang Sanzijing zhujie* (Commentary to the Arabic *Sanzijing*, preface 1819; edition 1870) and of the Taiping *Sanzijing* (1852) and *Yuzhi Qianzizhao* (The Imperially Composed Thousand Words Edict, 1854) will help to 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, 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.⁴ 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 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* 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.⁵

⁴ T’ung-tsu Ch’ü (Qu Tongzu), *Local Government in China under the Ch’ing*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard U.P., 1962, pp. 43-44.

⁵ For a detailed treatment of these books, see Evelyn Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch’ing China*, Ann

Since the Christian material 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* - *Baijiaxing*) 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 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 *shexue* (lower level community schools) were encouraged by the government, and supplemented privately financed institutions, which had always been the major channel for literacy.”⁶ *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 on the fields, and the family could rarely support a long curriculum of

Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1979, pp. 125-139.

⁶ Rawski, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

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.”⁷

Besides primers, it existed 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*, 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.⁸

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

Fr. Giulio Aleni was born near Brescia, at the time part of the Republic of Venice, in 1582.⁹ 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 Que.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ After having been a teacher of humanities in Italy and of mathematics in Macao, once in China he also tutored in scientific

⁷ *Shangcheng xianzhi*, 1803 ed., *juan* 6, p. 3b, as quoted in: Rawski, *op.cit.*, p. 49.

⁸ Tadako 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.

⁹ A 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.

¹⁰ A biography in Goodrich and Fang, *op.cit.*, pp. 1177-1178.

¹¹ From the beginning, the Company of Jesus had among its main goals the establishment of a new school

subjects some Chinese literati, like the official Ma Chengxiu¹² 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.”¹³

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 already mentioned Catholic *Four-Character Classic*.¹⁴ 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 Fr. 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 1640.¹⁵

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

system and the creation of a new study curriculum. This was done in the spirit of the Counter-Reformation, to counteract effectively the Protestant Reform of Martin Luther. A very interesting book on education written by the Jesuits in China is Fr. Vagnoni’s *Tongyou jiaoyu* (Education of Children, 1620), where the Western educational principles were illustrated for the first time to the Chinese. An analysis of this book goes beyond the limits of this paper. For a brief summary of the book, see Xu Zongze, *Ming Qing jian Yesuhuishi yizhu tiyao* (A Catalogue of Books Translated and Written by the Jesuits during the Ming and Qing Periods), Beijing, Zhonghua Shuju, 1949, p. 216-218.

¹² See a biographical note in Goodrich and Fang, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

¹³ Erik 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.

¹⁴ According to Louis Pfister, *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur les Jésuites de l’ancienne mission de Chine*, Shanghai, 1932-4, p. 134, the primer was first published in Beijing in 1642, and then republished in 1650, 1798, 1856 and 1861. In 1869 an illustrated edition with scenes from the Bible was printed by Fr. Vasseur, with the title of *Shengjiao shengxiang quantu* (Illustrations of Sacred Images of the Holy Religion). It is doubtful that the first edition was published by Aleni in Beijing: in 1642 he occupied the position of Vice Provincial of the South China mission, and was therefore in Fujian. Moreover, the political situation was so unstable that travelling in the country was difficult and dangerous. The only possible hypothesis is that the book was published by the Fathers of the mission in Beijing on behalf of Aleni. I made use of two copies of the 1653 edition (Pfister’s 1650 ?), edited by Adam Schall, now preserved at the Italian National Library, Rome, Fondo *Libri Rari*, 72.B.344 and 72.B.345. Only an exam of the original edition could possibly clarify exact date and place of publication.

¹⁵ See Erik Zürcher, “Giulio Aleni et ses relations avec le milieu des lettres chinois au XVII siècle,” in Lionello Lanciotti (ed.), *Venezia e l’Oriente*, Florence, L. Olschki, 1987, pp. 107-135.

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.”¹⁶ 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. The *Four-Character Classic* seems to have been a suitable textbook for the school and the catechetical meetings. Nothing prevents us from postulating the existence of similar Christian institutions in other parts of China, as well as in Fujian.

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 convey 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 of the New Testament. On the other, it had 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 and “barbarian” 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 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.

¹⁶ Nicolas Standaert, *Yang Tingyun, Confucian and Christian in Late Ming China*, Leiden, Brill, 1988, p. 88.

In six days, God created the universe. Aleni gives in these couplets the classical medieval cosmological view of the World: this world view was based on Aristotle's theory of the celestial phenomena which had been completed by the thirteenth century theologians St. Bonaventura and St. 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 "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 after the Creation: after 2,245 years since the 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*) are descendants of Shem (*Sheng*), those of Africa (*Liweiya*, lit. "Lybia") are 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 the govern of 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 virginal 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 miracle” (*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, of the coming of the Anti-Christ (*jia Tianzhu*) and of 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 the 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!¹⁷

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

The use by the Jesuit of the primer format for their own religious purposes is not the only historical instance of this kind. I have been able to trace at least two examples (but many more may exist, also in more ancient times) of nineteenth century primers used for ideological and religious purposes.

¹⁷ *Four-Character Classic*, p. 14b

The first one is the Muslim primer *Tianfang Sanzijing zhujie* (Commentary to the Arabic *Sanzijing*, preface 1809; edition 1870)¹⁸ by Liu Jieliang from “Jinling” (the Golden Mausoleum), i.e. 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 and not too far from Nanjing. In the preface, Yuan Guozha, 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: 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 give us an idea of the pedagogic methods used in the mosque’s school: “The real beginning of education is the reading at the age of six or seven, 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”¹⁹ 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.

¹⁸ Since the edition I used (preserved in the East Asian Library, University of California at Berkeley) is a commentary, the original text is probably prior to the date of the preface. Further research is needed to ascertain a precise date, and this goes beyond the scope of this brief paper.

¹⁹ *Tianfang sanzijing zhujie*, pp. 5b-6a.

Chinese Muslims had launched several uprisings during Qianlong's reign; and the *jihad* (holy wars) declared by the khans of Kokand, west of Chinese Turkestan, had 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 racial 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 Qianzizhao* (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. A complete English translation of these books is available and I will make use of these translations for a brief comparison.²⁰

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.²¹ Owing

²⁰ Franz 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.

²¹ See Michael, *op.cit.*, p. 152.

to his historical significance, the Taiping *Sanzijing* was translated by contemporary foreign observers, particularly interested in assessing the Christian ideology of the Taiping.²² 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 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...”²³

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. [...]

Obeys 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.²⁴

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.

²² 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 Michael, *op.cit.*, p. 152.

²³ Malan, *The Three-fold San-Tze-King*, pp. 5-6.

²⁴ Michael, *op.cit.*, pp. 160 and 161.

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 raise no doubts on the orthodoxy of their respective teachings.

In the case of the Catholic primer, we witness once again the “accommodation approach” of the Jesuits. As a matter of fact, many “foreign” elements still persist in the text, notably the transliterations of foreign names and the Aristotelian cosmological view. The Muslim primer appears instead to have undergone a deeper Sinification: no wonder, since Islam had been introduced into China much earlier than Catholicism. 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.

In a recent work, Erik Zürcher dissented from the thesis of Jacques Gernet on the impossibility of assimilation of Christianity in China.²⁵ Zürcher argues 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 is to be sought, in Zürcher’s words, in the contrast “expansion spontanée contre propagation dirigée.” This author argues that the difference lies 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.”²⁶

²⁵ Erik Zürcher, *Bouddhisme, christianisme et société chinoise*, Paris, Julliard, 1990.

²⁶ David Mungello, “Review” to *Bouddhisme, christianisme et société chinoise* by E. Zürcher, in *Sino-Western Cultural Relations Journal*, XIV, 1992, pp. 43-44.

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, and to do it, for the first time, at the popular level.²⁷

²⁷ Personal conversation with Erik Zürcher, S. Francisco, October 17, 1992.