# The Chinese Rites Controversy from Its Beginning to Modern Times

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In commemoration of the four hundredth anniversary of the coming of the Jesuits to the Middle Kingdom, I wish to dedicate this work to two Jesuits who devoted themselves to writing the history of those early missionaries: Father Francis A. Rouleau (1900-1984), who first told me the story of the Chinese rites controversy in the rustic hills of the Santa Cruz Mountains, and Pére Henri Bernard-Maitre (1889-1975), who continued that story for me in the quiet and peaceful surroundings of Chantilly.

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# Introduction

# 典禮問題

On July 11, 1742 Pope Benedict XIV issued the apostolic constitution *Ex quo singulari*. This bull brought to a close the bitterly fought controversy over the question of the Chinese rites, a struggle that had lasted for the better part of a century and a half. At issue was the problem of how Western man[1] was to translate into the Chinese language the concepts of the divinity and other spiritual realities and how he was to judge, on a moral basis, the ceremonies performed by the Chinese in honor of Confucius and their ancestors. The controversy involved the whole field of cross-cultural understanding and missionary accommodation.

The bull *Ex quo singulari* was the official answer of the Roman Catholic Church to this controversy. The making of this decision had involved in the course of a century and a half seven popes and two apostolic delegates; two Chinese emperors and their courts; the kings of Portugal, Spain, and France; the Jesuit confessor of Louis XIV; the Holy Office and the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith; the theology faculty of the Sorbonne; the Jansenists; preachers like Fenelon and Bossuet; writers like Voltaire and Leibnitz; the missionaries, their congregations, and superiors. Most important of all, it touched the

lives of the Chinese Christians and affected in an irrevocable way the course of the Church in the Middle Kingdom.

The bull, to all appearances, had put an end to this rankling controversy. In a word, it condemned the Confucian and ancestral rites, prohibiting the native Christians from participating in the rites. It also forbade further disputes on the question. However, the means that it took to bring about this state of silence and obedience, namely, the oath that the missionaries in China were constrained to take against the rites, would in a sense perpetuate the memory of this long controversy.

For almost two centuries after the condemnation, the enforced silence continued. To be sure, some of the missionaries reacted and voiced their objections to this trenchant stand, but Rome had spoken and was adamant in its decision. Eventually, the missionary effort fell into line with the official policy.

In the meantime, the Catholic Church in China, which had developed in the wake of the trade routes opened up by the Portuguese and Spanish navigators, had to struggle for survival, unable to make use of those traditional ceremonies that were part of the culture and heritage of the people. As the years went by many internal persecutions arose against the Catholic religion, which was looked upon as a foreign intrusion. Moreover, with the weakening of the Portuguese and Spanish empires, fewer recruits entered the mission field; and the Society of Jesus, which had supplied the majority of apostolic workers in China, was suppressed in 1773. Soon afterwards France, which had taken on the task of sending new missionaries to the Orient, became embroiled in revolutions and wars. With the coming of the industrial revolution, the ranks of the missionaries began to increase once again. At the same time, the Middle Kingdom became more entangled with Western colonial powers and with Japan, and it was





constantly plagued by internal disorder. Finally, in 1912, the Ch'ing dynasty came to an end and, with this, the history of the republic began.

Then, twenty years later, in a country outside of China, an incident took place that brought about the reappearance and reconsideration of the age-old rites controversy. On May 5, 1932 several Catholic students from the Jesuit university in Tokyo allegedly refused to bow before a Shinto shrine.[2] The whole country of Japan was on a wartime footing then, because the Japanese Kwantung army had seized and occupied Manchuria. The military government resorted to state Shinto in order to mobilize the nation spiritually, and they used the act of obeisance in front of the shrine as a test of the people's loyalty to the country. As could be expected, the refusal of the students led to a confrontation between the Church and the government. Eventually, when the government declared that the inclination of the head in front of the shrine was a purely civil act with no religious significance, the Church—albeit with great caution—permitted the native Catholics under certain conditions to bow before the shrine.

In the meantime, the new state of Manchukuo[3] was established in the northeastern part of China under the watchful supervision of the Kwantung army; and on this occasion Wangtao, the Royal Way, which was based on Confucianism, was proclaimed as the unifying spirit of the new regime. Accordingly, the government imposed the cult of Confucius upon its subjects, who were required to make an act of obeisance at the Confucian shrines. Thus a crisis of conscience emerged for the native Catholics. The ecclesiastical authorities were briefed about the previous developments in Japan. As in Japan, the church authorities acted only after the government made the official statement that the prescribed ceremonies in honor of Confucius were non-religious and only civil in meaning.

They thus permitted the native Catholics to participate in these ceremonies.

And finally, on December 8, 1939, in the wake of these developments in Japan and Manchukuo, the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith issued the *Instructio circa quasdam caeremonias super ritibus sinensibus* (Instruction on cetain ceremonies of the Chinese rites), a decree that announced to the native Catholics and missionaries in China a new stand that the Church was taking with regard to the ceremonies in honor of Confucius and the ancestors. The decree nullified many of the prohibitions laid upon the consciences of the people and, quite naturally, abolished the anti-rite oath enjoined upon the missionaries by the bull of 1742.

Thus, after an imposed silence of almost two centuries, the rites question appeared in the midst of the events cited above, and it was brought about by the Japanese militarists in Japan and in Manchuria. And so, within a few years, this controversy that had raged through the seventeenth century and half of the eighteenth came to a belated close.

In this study I will first review the rites issue in the so-called age of controversy[4] during the seventeenth and eighteenth century with a constant view to the modern developments of the question, and secondly I will describe the events surrounding the rites issue in the 1930s and analyze the various official documents that resulted from those events.

With regard to the age of controversy, therefore, no attempt will be made to cover all the proliferating details of the rites issue.[5] It was mentioned above that the Chinese rites question comprised two general problems: the linguistic and semantic problem of how to designate in Chinese the divinity and other spiritual concepts, and secondly the problem of the ceremonies in honor of Confucius and the ancestors. The first problem, the





terminology aspect of the controversy, will not figure into our treatment, although it remains a perennial problem in the missionary accommodation of any church which seeks to implant itself in a foreign society. Among Catholic missionaries, however, the terminology question did not play as significant a role in the modern phase of the controversy as it did in the seventeenth century.[6]

Another problem arose in the age of controversy concerning the use of the Chinese language for the holy Scripture, the mass, and the divine office. This dispute concerned the Christian liturgy and the ordination of native Chinese to the priesthood. It developed at the same time as the Chinese rites question, but its developments and problems are to a large extent separate and should not be confused with the Chinese rites question.[7]

In my own treatment of this age I will consider the Confucian and ancestral rites in the Ming period when the missionaries, following the Portuguese trade route, made their first appearance in China. I will describe how the controversy arose over the question of these rites, and then examine those sections concerning the rites which appear in the various decrees of the popes, apostolic delegates, bishops, and local superiors, as well as the pronouncements of the Holy Office and the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. These last were the chief ecclesiastical agencies for the administration of the missions.[8] Numerous citations from the decrees can be found in various sources, but I have organized and listed them here in order to give the reader a handy reference and to assist him or her in gaining an overall grasp of the often confusing ebb and flow of the arguments in the long controversy.

After the age of controversy, there followed a period of transition that lasted for another century and a half. These years are usually passed over, for the bull of 1742 had in a

sense ended the controversy and no new decrees were enacted during this period. However, during these years many questions were raised by the missionaries in the field concerning the application of the injunctions of *Ex quo singulari*, and a treatment of these difficulties sheds further light on the controversy. Latourette gives us a sampling of these questions in his treatment of the controversy.[9] In chapter 4, I have listed and explained all the important and pertinent responses given to these questions by the Propaganda Fide and the Holy Office.

The rites issue erupted once again in Japan and in Manchuria in the 1930s. For the most part, the Church was reacting to the demands of the times and, for this reason, the new decrees enacted by the Church can only be fully understood in terms of the historical circumstances that occasioned the reappearance of the rites issue. I will describe these historical events and also analyze and explain the new decrees in the light of this background. The study will make it evident that the policy of the military government in Japan with regard to the Shinto shrines and a similar policy in regard to the Confucian shrines in Manchukuo enacted by the government there at the behest of the Japanese Kwantung army were responsible for opening up the rites issue again. Furthermore, in chronicling the modern phase of the rites controversy, writers often give prior treatment to the developments in Manchukuo, but I believe that this presents a distorted historical perspective and that for a correct understanding of this modern phase the problems surrounding the shrine issue in Japan and the decrees enacted as a result of these problems should be dealt with first.[10]

Up to the present time no one has written a detailed account of the modern phase of the Chinese rites controversy. There have been a number of articles in the encyclopedias as well as a few articles in various





periodicals.[11] These have dealt mainly with the Church decrees without elaborating on the historical background of the times.

It may be that a full account of the modern developments of the rites controversy is still premature, for these events are relatively close to our own time. All the evidence is not in, and there are still archival records to be uncovered and studied. Nevertheless, there is another type of evidence that can assist us in putting together the essential details of the general picture of these developments. There are people living in our midst who were direct witnesses of and participants in the events themselves, and they can act as reliable informants. After Pearl Harbor the missionaries in Japan who came from Allied countries were put under surveillance and eventually deported. The missionaries in Manchuria and those south of the Great Walls were, with few exceptions, banished from the mainland after the Communists replaced the Nationalist regime.[12] In the summer of 1972 and thereafter, I made several trips to the Orient to contact as many of these witnesses as possible in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan. I was also able to meet various individuals in Japan who had lived through the events that took place in the Japanese Empire. I received further information from other former missionaries in the Orient who now lived in the United States, Canada, and Europe. I met many of them who lived at the various motherhouses, which I was visiting for archival materials.[13] At any rate, with this oral history and the available historical data at hand, I believe a reliable account can be given of the modern phase of the rites controversy. I have pursued the matter as far as I can, and present it in the hope that, as more evidence comes to light and time improves our perspective of these historical events, others will complete the study.

This modern phase must be looked upon as an integral

part of the story of the rites controversy. Even if the military situation in Japan and Manchukuo had not occasioned the resurgence of the problem, other factors were working to bring this about. The missionaries were still taking the anti-rite oath. On the other hand, modern man was beginning to take a more tolerant attitude towards the religions of the East, and Christianity was becoming more ecumenical in its outlook and less exclusive in its approach to other beliefs. At the same time, the Oriental mind was slowly changing under the influence of Western culture. The trends of the times would eventually have forced the Catholic Church to reevaluate its position on the old rites question.

Thus, in this study I have laid greater stress on the modern developments in the 1930s, but this is only because the details of this period with regard to the rites question are less known. But these developments cannot be fully understood and appreciated unless they are seen against the background of the early controversy, and so it is here that we shall begin our story.



# 1 The Rites in the Ming Period

典禮問題

During the sixteenth century, when the early missionaries followed the seafaring traders from Lisbon into the open port of Macao and later entered the Ming Empire, it was a foregone conclusion that their arrival would lead to some kind of confrontation. The missionaries came garbed in strange-looking Western clothes. They had landed in a territory which to them was a frontier at the very fringe of their civilization. Besides gifts for the emperor, they brought with them a religion that had been imbued with centuries of development on European soil and comprised a set of dogmatic beliefs that could not be tampered with or blended with other beliefs.

The Chinese, on the other hand, looked upon their own country as the Middle Kingdom, the center of culture and civilization, yet they were shut in upon themselves and entrenched in their superior tradition. But this did not prevent the Chinese from assimilating what might come from the outside. In religious matters they were not totally closed to foreign influence. To some degree they were syncretistic in their approach, quite willing to take advantage of the benefits of other religions, and they were

tolerant as long as a new way did not interfere with or overturn the basic structure of their own society.[1]

The confrontation would affect all those areas where the lifestyles of the missionaries and the Chinese differed, but the disparity would be felt most deeply in the religious sphere and particularly in the matter of worship. The missionaries had traveled halfway around the globe to spread their faith. Their religion, born in Israel, was to a large extent a product of the West and was nurtured by a credal tradition that recognized certain dogmas and banished from its fold those who would not assent to them.

Soon after they poured the waters of baptism on the heads of the natives, the missionaries were faced with the question of whether or not to allow these neophytes to participate in the customary funeral rites of the dead. Some of the converts belonged to the gentry class or the so-called *shên*-shih.[2] (They are also sometimes referred to as the *literati* or the scholar elite, largely because they acquired academic rank by passing various examinations in the Confucian classics.) As members of the gentry class the baptized scholars were expected to take part in ceremonies in honor of the holy sage Confucius. Here too the question arose of the propriety of such conduct in view of the Christian dogma that forbade superstition and the worship of idols.

The missionaries entered the Chinese society in the latter part of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). The basic structure of that society had lasted through many other dynasties and would continue on into the beginning of the twentieth century. What gave this society a cultural homogeneity that transcended ethnic differences and a continuity that outlasted other civilizations was the religious tradition that emanated not so much from the formal systems of Taoism and Buddhism, nor from the practices of professional geomancers and sorcerers, but rather from those religious elements which were diffused





throughout the social institutions of the country, such as the worship of heaven, the cult of the patron gods of the community, and the cult of the dead. These religious elements comprised what C.K. Yang has termed "diffused religion" in contrast to "institutional religion."[3] They pervaded all the important sectors of social life, the family, the trade guilds, the agricultural society, the imperial courts; and they contributed greatly to the stability and permanence of the society.

Along with Taoism and Buddhism, Confucianism is traditionally listed as one of the "three teachings" *(san chiao)* of China.[4] The name comes from "Confucius," the latinized form which the first missionaries used for the title K'ung Fu Tzu (K'ung the master). Its doctrine, first inspired by Confucius, was enlarged and transformed over the centuries by his followers. Laying aside the question of whether or not Confucianism can be characterized as a religion—this depends on how religion is defined—one can still note very fundamental differences between Confucianism and the other two systems of belief. Confucianism was basically a "this-worldly" way of life. It did not set up any pantheon of gods or distinctive priesthood, nor did it develop any supernatural dogma. Yet despite its non-theistic outlook, it did take on religious elements, like the cult of the dead, which permeated Chinese society and whose significance the Confucianists tried to rationalize. Confucianism had been adopted and sanctioned by the Han dynasty in 136 B.C. under the emperor Wu Ti, and from that time on it was more or less identified with the state. In this manner, as a sociopolitical way of life, it was able to function effectively and actively in the whole society.

The traditions which were fostered by the diffused religion of Chinese society and were bolstered by the teachings of Confucianism set the pattern for the whole Chinese social system. This was done principally by inculcating the observance of the virtue of *hsiao* or filial

piety.[6] Fundamentally, this virtue governed the relationship between aged parents and their offspring.[7] The duty for a man to care for his parents during their lifetime and to render them a proper funeral and burial after death constituted his greatest human responsibility. At the same time, filial piety had a significance that went beyond the narrow confines of domestic ties—it extended to his dealings with all the people who were related to him through lineage; that is, through marriage, descent, and ancestry,[8] and ultimately to his general conduct in society. In short, filial piety prepared him to fulfill his responsibility to society. It therefore colored and influenced all the five basic relationships *(wu lun)* found in Chinese society—ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brother, friend and friend.[9] Thus filial piety served as the cornerstone of all morality. It was the cardinal social virtue that gave stability and permanence to the Chinese family and lineage system and, through this, to all of Chinese society.

The obervance of filial piety was not left up to chance or emotion; but *li*, or the norm of social conduct and propriety, was set forth in minute detail for its observance.[10] Thus the obedient son was expected to be neatly dressed when he appeared before his parents, and on wintry nights he was to warm the bed for them. There were also many special rules of mourning that a son had to observe when he lost his father.[11] It is most important for us to understand the reason why these rules of propriety exercised such a powerful influence on Chinese society. First of all, *li* represented the norm of propriety as set down from time immemorial by the forbears of the Chinese people, and so these rules were always held in the highest esteem. Moreover, these examples of filial piety as practiced by their forbears ultimately reflected the ways of heaven; and the observance of the virtue of filial piety





ensured the continuance of the harmony and unity of heaven and earth.[12]

The spirit of filial piety thus pervaded Chinese society; but more than this, it went beyond the boundaries of this world, beyond the death of one's parents, and it reached into the shadows of the ancestors. In a true sense the family comprised not only the living but also the dead, and by the rules of *li* the obedient son was expected to cherish his parents in life and to render service to them even after death. The ancestral altar with its incense smoke and flickering candlelight instilled an atmosphere of awe in the family dwelling and was a constant reminder of the close relationship between the living and the dead.[13]

The far-reaching scope of filial piety is indicated in the famous passage from *Chung Yung:*

> Filial piety is seen in the skillful carrying out of the wishes of our forefathers, and the skillful carrying forward of their undertaking.... Thus they served the dead as they would have served them alive; they served the departed as they would have served them had they been continued among them.[14]

Time and again the missionaries would cite this passage to explain the Chinese attitude towards the dead.

Filial piety after death had to be continued in the same spirit as before but in a different form. The personality of the departed was localized in some material substance. A paper object with the name of the deceased written on it was placed before the corpse and accompanied the body to the grave site.[15] After burial, the paper object was returned to the home and placed on a small altar where it received the prayers of the mourners. Eventually the paper was replaced by a more permanent form of memorial, the so-called spirit tablet, which was usually made of wood and bore the name of the deceased, the family status, and the person's rank in society. On the back was written the date

of birth and death of the deceased. This tablet in some way represented the personality of the departed and carried the inscription *shen wei*, that is, "the seat of the spirit" of the departed. For this reason, the tablets were also called *shen wei*.[16]

The unsophisticated people who gathered before the domestic shrine believed that the souls of the deceased were in some way present in the tablets.[17] Under the supervision of the head of the family, the mourners performed various gestures of respect and reverence before the tablets. They knelt and bowed beside the flickering candles, and they burned incense and paper money before the spirit tablets. On certain prescribed occasions such as the anniversary of the death of the deceased or on the first and fifteenth days of the Chinese month, family meetings were held. The family then made offerings of food and drink, placed them in front of the shrine, and later they partook of the offerings in a common banquet. In death as in life, the family directed acts of obeisance to their relatives.

The more affluent or more illustrious among the dead were commemorated beyond their family circles by spirit tablets that were installed in halls dedicated to the lineage of the clan.[18] These hall tablets assured the departed a longer remembrance in the minds of the descendants. The domestic tablets were necessarily limited in number, and after a few generations some of the dead disappeared into anonymity and oblivion. It is of importance for us to note that the commemoration that took place in front of the hall tablets presented essentially the same problem to the eyes and minds of the missionaries as did the rites before the domestic tablets.

Now the rites in honor of Confucius began as a domestic service within the circle of the K'ung family and clan, but these rites eventually developed into a full-fledged state cult. This did not occur overnight, for in the eyes of the





people of his time Confucius, who had taught the principles of right living and good government and had traveled abroad searching for a model ruler to put them into practice, had died an apparent failure in his endeavor. But certain events converged to thrust his name and his memory beyond the domestic pale of the K'ung family.

First of all, a *circonstance accidentalle*[19] altered the course of his posthumous reputation. In 213 B.C., during the Ch'in dynasty, an imperial decree was issued to burn many of the books that extolled the traditional ways of the past, books which were held in the greatest reverence by the scholar elite.[20] In Han times, however, a sharp reaction arose against this wanton destruction of traditional values, and scholars began an organized movement to recover the classics. What were restored—some mutilated, others altered—were for the most part those ancient books which, according to tradition, Confucius had compiled and edited.[21] These books became the standard textbooks of Chinese education and were later recognized as the official canonical books of China. Confucius was credited with preserving the people's heritage, and thus he became the voice of the past. These writings were esteemed by the scholars and thus became the spiritual legacy of Chinese society. Confucius accordingly became the model for all scholars and the highest authority for those who were studying the classics.

More than literary fame, however, was required to bring Confucius into the realm of a state cult. Various emperors made visits to the memorial sanctuary of Confucius at Chufou, where he had died, and this brought great prestige to the ancestral hall of the K'ung family. Then, in 59 A.D., during the Eastern Han dynasty, the emperor Ming Ti ordered sacrifices to be offered to Confucius at all government schools. In this way the cult hall became a part of the school establishment. This is the first definite evidence of a regular cult to Confucius outside of the K'ung

family. Confucius then became the official patron of all students in government schools.

The cult of Confucius ebbed and flowed with the changing destiny of the state. It possessed no priestly caste for its own perpetuation. It could flourish and thrive only in a state that enjoyed peace, order, and good government. The civilizations that followed the Han dynasty declined and deteriorated, and the unsettled atmosphere of the times favored the growth of Taoism and Buddhism. At length the T'ang dynasty ushered in a period of relative order, and in 630 A.D., the emperor T'ai Tsun ordered every district in the country to construct a sanctuary to Confucius. The cult was then a definite part of Chinese society and continued in various forms through the ensuing periods into the Ming dynasty.

But imperial decrees alone were not the real reason why the cult was able to continue and grow through these historical changes. Confucianism was preeminently a doctrine and a way of life for the gentry class, and it was from this class that the officials came who administered the welfare of the state and on whom every changing dynasty and ruler was dependent. These officials were selected through an examination system whose purpose was to fill the government offices with the most talented minds of the country. This political machinery, calculated to produce the kind of public servants China needed, continued almost to the end of the nineteenth century. And Confucianism went along with it, for it was precisely the Confucian classics that made up the bulk of the subject matter for the government examinations.

By the law of the land, Confucian temples or *wên miao*[22] were constructed wherever government schools were established. The physical arrangement whereby the *wên miao* and the school were joined together became the external manifestation of the intimate connection between Confucianism and the examination system of the





government. This complex allowed for other buildings and arrangements, but besides the *wên miao* and the school there was always a library where the traditional classics and their commentaries were stored and an auditorium dedicated to the study and explanation of those fundamental human relationships so essential in a Confucian society.

The conferring of degrees upon the successful examinees took place in the temple or hall dedicated to Confucius. Here there was an image or spirit tablet representing the sage. He was the patron of these scholars who were examined on the Confucian classics, and they quite naturally expressed their sentiments of attachment and gratitude by performing external acts of respect in front of the image or spirit tablet, especially at graduation time.

Besides these graduation ceremonies, the scholars and officials held periodic observances in honor of Confucius. On special occasions solemn rites were observed where an animal like a bull or a pig would be slaughtered and sacrificed, wine and food offered, and a grandiose banquet would follow.

The ritual for the ceremonies was worked out by the Ministry of Rites—for among the Confucians there was no priestly caste—and sometimes they were determined by the emperor himself.[23] The first ruler of the Ming dynasty, Hung Wu, set down the general pattern for the ceremonies when he went to the Confucian temple at the beginning of his reign and later offered a sacrifice to the holy sage in the government school. By imperial decree these observances were to be held in the spring and autumn every year. The Ministry of Rites set down the particulars of the ritual to be followed, the number and the type of musical pieces and pantomimes to be performed. Aside from these solemn rites, the subordinate officials were required to perform a ceremony of lower rank at the new and full moon.[24]

In 1530, a half century or so before the arrival of the missionaries in Macao, the emperor Chia Ching under the influence of a scholar named Chang Tsung made important reforms in the cult of Confucius. Up until this time the holy sage had been revered in the form of an image, but now all the images in the temples were to be removed and destroyed. They were to be replaced by spirit tablets. And this is how Confucius has been revered ever since. The title *wang*, meaning the "royal one," was also taken away from Confucius at this time because it suggested an imperial rank. At different times Confucius had been honored with different titles. Later on, the Ministry of Rites, to which the emperor entrusted the task of finding a new title, bestowed on him the designation *chih sheng hsien shih K'ung Tzu*, meaning "Master K'ung the most holy teacher of antiquity."[25] This removed Confucius from all connection with political rank, and it did away with any hint of divinity; it is in this form that the title has come down to modern times.

Thus by the time the first Jesuit missionaries arrived in China, the cult of Confucius was well established. Though it was fundamentally an aristocratic cult, his teachings exerted a widespread influence throughout the country.

As the missionaries began their evangelical work and made their first inroads into Chinese society, they were soon confronted with the problem and necessity of making a moral judgment about the ancestral and Confucian rites. Were they of a religious nature? Could they be a form of idolatry and superstition? Or were they simply of a social and civil character? These questions demanded some sort of practical solution, for the native converts were expected by custom and tradition and also by their communities to attend these rites.

The ceremonies that the missionaries observed and on which they had to make a moral judgment were strange to their eyes, and they were certainly disturbing. First, there





was the matter of the wooden tablet. On it was inscribed the words "seat of the spirit," and the various ceremonies took place in front of this tablet. Then, there were the gestures of reverence, especially the *kowtow (k'out'ou)*, wherein the Chinese knelt and bowed until their foreheads touched the ground.[26] This obeisance was performed in front of the tablet. Finally, there was the burning of incense and paper money, and the offering of food and wine. In the solemn ceremonies of Confucius, there was also the slaying and offering of an animal.

The difficulty and danger in interpreting these symbolic objects and gestures came about for various reasons.[27] First, the objects and gestures were similar to those which the Westerers reserved for religious worship and hence could easily be interpreted in the light of such thinking. Secondly, the missionaries came from a world where there was an enormous, at times an unbridgeable, separation between the living and the dead and between the profane and the holy.[28] Furthermore, these missionaries had come from a Europe that had recently undergone drastic turmoil and divisions in religious beliefs. The Roman Catholic Church was reacting and defending itself against these "reformations." It had adopted a hard dogmatic line and demanded full assent from its members. This credal and historical background would always be a part of the missionaries mental disposition. Lastly, all the missionaries were trained in theology and came to the missions with one purpose in mind: to spread the faith. As for other matters that might come up, they could only rely upon their own common sense, their observation and reflection, and their own individual educations to make the necessary judgments and the decisions.

What was the symbolic value of the objects used in the ceremonies and the various gestures performed during the ceremonies?[29] Were they religious in meaning and content or were they simply memorials that kept alive the memory

of the dead in the minds of their descendants?[30] The answer to these fundamental questions was the crux of the whole matter, and on it would depend, unless Rome intervened and said otherwise, the decision to permit or not to permit the native converts to participate in the ancestral and Confucian rites.

The problems surrounding this question were more complex and involved than might appear on the surface. First, there was the question concerning the historical development of the rites and their symbolic meaning: How did the objects and gestures used in the ceremonies come into being, and did the original historical meaning of the rites always remain the same or did it change over the centuries? Was it possible now to ascertain that original meaning? Secondly, there was the problem of understanding the current significance of these objects and gestures, that is to say, their significance in the Ming society of the seventeenth century: What did the objects and gestures mean to the unquestioning minds of the ordinary people and to the more rationalistic thinking of the scholar officials? Closely allied to this problem was the matter of method: How was the meaning of the rites to be determined—through an analysis of the objects and gestures themselves, or from a thorough investigation of the past literature on the subject, or from the information given by the native participants, or perhaps from the statements of the authoritative representatives of the Chinese state? Finally, there was the question of how the various ecclesiastical decrees on the rites were to be made: Who or what body of men would make the final decisions? These decision-makers, whether in Rome or in China, were faced with the task of analyzing and evaluating the rites and of laying down procedural rules for the missionaries and for the native converts. For this they had to obtain the necessary information, but, in the case of





Rome, they were halfway around the world from the scene of the action.[31] What means did they use to gather the information? Was it sufficiently extensive and reliable? What advisers did they consult? As we now look at these intricate problems, prudence might have dictated more delay and deeper consideration of the whole matter, but circumstances were pressing and urging them to take a definite stand on the question.

# 2 The Position of Matteo Ricci

# 典禮問題

On January 24, 1601 Matteo Ricci finally entered Peking, and a few days later he presented his gifts to the throne. More than eighteen years had passed since his arrival in Macao, the gateway to the Ming empire. Ricci had laid the foundation for mission settlements in Shaoching, Shaochow, Nanchang, and Nanking. A few years earlier he had been in the capital for two months, but this time he had come to stay. He had always felt that the missionary effort of the Catholic Church would be of short duration if it were not firmly established in Peking. He had finally reached his goal, but he was only to spend nine years there before his death.[1]

It was this Italian Jesuit who had set the pattern of activity for the early missionaries in China, and it was his attitude and policy on the ancestral and Confucian ceremonies that later gave rise to the rites controversy. Ricci had come with a reputation as a mathematician and cartographer. He was also well versed in the Chinese language and the classics, and he had written on such diverse subjects as the art of cultivating one's memory, friendship, the books of Euclid, and the truths of the faith.

His studies and writings had not kept him away from actual missionary work; in fact, they gave him the precise resources he needed to gain entrance into the society of the gentry class. He was a scholar, humanist, writer, and missionary. Moreover in 1597 he was appointed superior of the Jesuits who were working in China.

Ricci did not set about his task as a self-confident person ready to set the world on fire. He came as a sympathetic inquirer with a deep interest in and respect for the Chinese and their culture. He hoped to build his apostolic work upon this understanding. He had originally put on the garb of a Buddhist monk; but when he learned that the bonzes were looked down upon, he exchanged this for the typical dress of a Chinese scholar to make himself more acceptable to the gentry class. His curly beard, blue eyes, and melodious Italian voice—the particular qualities that struck the eyes and ears of the Chinese[2]—would always set him apart, but otherwise he had become a Chinese among the Chinese.

In his memoirs, which we shall simply call the *Storia*,[3]—Ricci kept a record of his activity and observations. In the beginning of the fifth book of the *Storia* he wrote that the visitor to the Far East, Father Alessandro Valignano,[4] had returned to Macao from Japan and had opened up certain deliberations concerning the missionary work in China. The importance of these meetings can be judged from one of the decisions made by Valignano: the severence of the China mission from the jurisdiction of the rector in Macao. This arrangement gave greater liberty of action to the superior of the Chinese mission. In connection with these deliberations, Ricci added one terse statement: "Finally, with much prudence, I settled many cases and things, about which we had difficulties."[5] The author did not elaborate on the nature of these problems, but we can surmise that they dealt, at least in part, with questions concerning the ancestral and Confucian rites.[6]





Sometime after becoming superior of the mission, Ricci consulted Valignano; and he, following the judgment of Ricci, issued directives regarding these rites. The original texts of the directives have never been found, but the fact that they were issued is beyond doubt.[7] These directives most likely appeared in 1603[8] and set down the general Jesuit policy on the rites. The main substance of their content can be safely drawn from Ricci's writings and from the course of action subsequently taken by the Jesuits under his jurisdiction. While there were conflicting views among the Jesuits in regard to the terminology aspect of the controversy, there was common agreement among them on the general principle and practice regarding the ancestral and Confucian rites.[9]

In evaluating the opinion of Ricci on the rites, it should constantly be kept in mind that his writings preceded the formal controversies on the rites and also preceded the principles of probabilism.[10] Questions would arise later on as to what degree of probability the rites could be said to be superstitious. So one should not expect in Ricci's statements the same precision in the use of terms which these disputes later produced. When he considered the pagan practices of the Chinese, he did so with a deep sense of sympathy, patience, and hope. At the same time, he looked with careful discrimination upon the rites as one would look upon an apple which was not entirely bad but whose spoiled part has to be rejected and whose good part could somehow be saved and accepted.[11]

Concerning the cult of the dead, Ricci writes in the *Storia:*

> The most solemn thing among the *literati* and in use from the king down to the very least being is the offering they annually make to the dead at certain times of the year of meat, fruits, perfumes, and pieces of silk cloth—paper among the poorest—and incense. And in this act they make the fulfilment of their duty to their relatives, namely, "to serve them in death as though they were alive." Nor do they

> think in this matter that the dead will come to eat the things mentioned or that they might need them; but they say they do this because they know of no other way to show their love and grateful spirit toward them [the dead]. And some of them told us that this ceremony was begun more for the living than for the dead, that is, to teach the children and the ignorant ones to honor and serve their living relatives, since they [the children] see serious people doing even after death the offices for the relatives that they were wont to do when they [the relatives] were alive. And since they do not recognize any divinity in these dead ones, nor do they ask or hope for anything from them, all this stands outside of idolatry, and also one can say there is probably no superstition, although it will be better for the souls of these dead ones, if they are Christians, to change this into almsgiving to the poor.[12]

This does not cover all the aspects of the funeral rite, but most of these remarks can be applied to the general cult of the dead: that the rite consists of certain offerings, that the people honor the departed ancestors "as if they were living" (words taken from the *Chung Yung*),[13] that the rite is meant fundamentally for the sake of the survivors rather than the dead, and finally that the placing of the food upon the graves seems to be free of idolatry *(idolatria)* and "perhaps" *(forse)* also of any taint of superstition.

Ricci was aware that many of the rites were mingled with superstitious practices, but in these he sought to understand and to determine whatever was according to nature and reason and therefore permissible. Those rites in which the appearance of superstition was minimal could be tolerated tentatively for the sake of the converts who had been brought up in the social atmosphere of those customs. He strove, however, to bring those customs into conformity with Christian practices or to substitute for them works of charity such as almsgiving to the poor. From the *Storia* we know that funerals among the converts were





conducted in a Christian manner and that certain pagan rites were actually omitted.[14]

The *Storia* gives us some idea of the general attitude which Ricci took towards the funeral rites. From the above-mentioned directives of 1603, which reflected Ricci's thinking, we can learn the pertinent details of the actual practice the Jesuits followed regarding the rites.[15] Thus they forbade the converts to say prayers and petitions to the dead, and they forbade the burning of paper money.[16] Moreover they condemned the belief that the dead received nourishment from the food offerings. At the same time they permitted the use of flowers, candles, and incense at the funeral, as well as the use of spirit tablets. They judged the wearing of the mourning garment and the performance of the *kowtow* in front of the tablet as gestures of respect to the dead. All this was in accord with Ricci's way of thinking: where there was no clear suggestion of superstition, he was for tolerance; but at the same time he tried to bring the ceremony gradually into conformity with Christian practice.

Regarding the ceremonies in honor of Confucius, Ricci writes:

> The real temple of the *literati* is that of Confucius, which by law is built for him in every city, in the place we call the school *(scuola)*; it is very sumptuous, and attached to it is the palace of the magistrate who governs those who have already attained the first degree in letters. In the most prominent place in the temple stands the statue of Confucius, or his name excellently worked into a plaque in gold letters, and at his side the statues or names of his other disciples, who are moreover considered to be saints. To that place at every new moon and full moon come the magistrates of the city, with the above-mentioned graduates, to do honor to him with the usual genuflections, and they light candles to him and place incense in the censer placed before the altar. And likewise on the anniversary of his birth and at certain [other] times of the year, they offer

> him with great solemnity dead animals and other items to eat to thank him for the fine teachings which he left them in his books, by means of which they attained their magistracies or degrees; [they do this] without reciting any prayers to him or asking anything of him, just as we said concerning their dead.[17]

Again, with keen perception, Ricci describes the main elements of the rites performed by the gentry class in honor of Confucius. He emphasizes that they do not recite prayers to ask favors of Confucius and that all the gestures in front of the statue or tablet are performed out of gratitude for his teachings.

To Ricci's way of thinking, the ordinary rites performed in honor of Confucius did not contain any strictly religious implication and did not appear to involve any superstition. Fundamentally they possessed a civil and social significance, though we should bear in mind that in his writings Ricci never made the formal distinction between "religious" and "civil" rites. The basis for his attitude came from the way in which he regarded Confucianism. In his judgment, it tried to avoid the question of the future life; it had a strictly "this-worldly" outlook. Its ultimate purpose was "the peace and quiet of the realm and the good governance of the houses and the individuals," and the principal emphasis was placed on the five relationships *(quinque correlationi)* "father and son, husband and wife, lord and vassal, older and younger son, companion and companion."[18] Thus Ricci looked upon Confucianism as a way of life for the gentry class and through them for all the Chinese people. And in this respect it was different from the two religions, Buddhism and Taoism:

> ... we came to the conclusion that this [Confucianism] is not a formal rule *(legge formata)*, but is really only an academy set up for the good governance of the republic.[19]





In accordance with this understanding, the Jesuit missionaries permitted the Chinese converts of the gentry class to participate in the Confucian rites which were performed when degrees were awarded to successful examinees. The presence of the candidates at these graduation rites was for many of them the introduction to a career in government service. On the other hand, the missionaries did not give a blanket permission to participate in all the rites performed in the Confucian temples. They forbade the Christians of the gentry class from taking part in the solemn ceremony in honor of Confucius where animal sacrifice took place; the reason for this prohibition being, "because it smacks of superstition."[20]

The stand that Ricci and the other early Jesuits took and the judgment they made on the rites question derived from their conviction that there was no evidence that the rites were superstitious in their original form. They were persuaded that the rites at this early period of development were essentially civil and social in practice.[21] According to their opinion, these rites in the course of time gradually became entangled with superstitious accretions. They argued that the rites could be purged of these erroneous practices, which were adventitious in nature and did not affect the substance of the rites. In their primitive form these rites were not essentially religious but only reverential acts—acts of social consequence in the case of the ancestral rites and of civil consequence in the case of the Confucian rites. In the last analysis, they had as their end the cultivation of *hsiao* (filial piety) and through this the peace and harmony of Chinese society.

This way of thinking was based on the assumption that the rites could be traced back to Confucius and therefore their original meaning could be determined by the study of the early Confucian writings. In the earliest stages the rites apparently developed with no sign of superstition, and the

Chinese of those times are described as living according to the natural law. In the words of Ricci,

> Of all the gentiles [pagans] who have come to our notice in Europe, I know of none who had fewer errors in relation to matters of religion than China had in its earliest antiquity.[22]

Moreover, various quotations were cited from various places in the Confucian classics to show that the ancient Chinese had rudimenary Christian notions of God and man.[23]

Next, the Jesuits relied heavily on the critical judgments made about the rites by their contemporary Confucian scholars. These people faithfully observed the ancestral and Confucian rites and staunchly defended the propriety of their behavior. Yet, paradoxically enough, they were mostly rationalistic and agnostic in their explanation of the rites. In accord with the neo-Confucian thinking of the philosophers of the Sung period—which later became the official orthodox interpretation of the teachings of Confucius—they denied the immortality of the human soul and any divinity in the person of the holy sage. Confucius himself had said in the *Lun Yü* that his principal concern was with the realities of this life rather than the uncertainties of the next life.[24] The rationalistic tendencies of the neo-Confucianists kept them from coloring their interpretation of the rites with any superstitious meaning.

Finally, the Jesuits, and especially Ricci, based their conclusions on the close observation they had made of Chinese life and society. Anyone reading the *Storia* will be deeply impressed with the meticulous care of the author's observation and, above all, with the caution and prudence of his judgments.

Underlying this whole approach was the conviction that the original substance of the rites was naturally good and could be continued with a Christian orientation. Christianity was not meant to totally supplant another





culture, but was rather to be implanted into the matrix of that culture. Anything that was patently superstitious like the burning of paper money and the sacrifices of animals were to be removed; but the rest could be tolerated, even if not approved, and then gradually redirected along Christian lines. Even if some less educated persons might give a superstitious interpretation to some of the less specific aspects of the rites, like the *kowtow* and the offering of food, as long as there was no certainty regarding their superstitious character, one could not bind the consciences of the converts to follow a doubtful but perhaps safer course of action. The Jesuits felt that the whole future of the mission was at stake and only by this approach could Christianity be indigenized into the Chinese civilization without being stigmatized as an entirely foreign importation.

To the scholars, then, with their neo-Confucian leanings, there was hardly any risk of superstition, however devotedly they took part in the rites; but this was not true for the ordinary people. Many of the gestures and objects—whatever their original symbolism—were susceptible to superstitious interpretations, and many of the common Chinese people subscribed to such beliefs. China was a country rife with magical arts and superstition, and the converted natives were surrounded with these temptations.

The Jesuits were preoccupied at this stage with the question of the original meaning of the rites and with the thinking of the neo-Confucianist scholars, and thus they did not give due attention to the wider sociological aspect of the problem.[25] Somehow they believed that once the primitive and essential meaning of the rites could be fathomed and determined, then the subsequent superstitious growth could be removed by a process of education and finally it could be replaced by practices more consonant with Christian belief.

Up to this point the question of the rites involved only the Jesuit missionaries. They debated and argued among themselves especially on the terminology aspect of the problem;[26] but on the matter of the rites the position that Ricci had taken strongly influenced their way of thinking and it later received the endorsement of Valignano. The discussions and debates continued under subsequent visitors.[27] However, the question was about to take a new turn. It would soon involve the members of other religious orders who would object to the Jesuit procedure, and the resulting waves would eventually engulf Rome, Paris, and the other centers of Christendom in Europe.



# 3 The Age of Controversy

# 典禮問題

With the coming of the Dominicans and the Franciscans to the Chinese mainland and the establishment of their missions in Fukien in the 1630s, the controversy took on a more definite shape.[1] For half a century or so the Jesuits had been the only missionaries in China, but from this time onwards, their "intramural" disputes were to involve the newcomers and would divide the thinking and practices of all the apostolic workers. As background material to what would take place in the twentieth century, it is necessary to summarize the pertinent decrees and edicts that were issued during this age of controversy;[2] for it is only against this background that the modern developments and documents on the rites question can be adequately understood and appraised.

## 1. Juan Baptista Morales and Innocent X's Decree of 1645[3]

The first judgment made by Rome on the matter of the Chinese rites was issued by the Propaganda Fide on September 12, 1645 and had the sanction of Pope Innocent X. Juan Baptista Morales, a Dominican missionary who had