

Libraries of Western learning for China: Circulation of Western books between Europe and China in the Jesuit Mission (ca. 1650 – ca. 1750)
1. Logistics of book acquisition and circulation

Leuven Chinese Studies XXIII
Leuven, 2012, 679 p., EUR 75.00
ISBN 978-908-1436571

Libraries of Western learning for China: Circulation of Western books between Europe and China in the Jesuit Mission (ca. 1650 – ca. 1750)
2. Formation of Jesuit libraries

Leuven Chinese Studies XXVI
Leuven, 2013, 559 p., EUR 60.00
ISBN 978-908-2090901

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In the 16th–18th Centuries AD, China was of great interest to Europeans. The arrival of the Jesuit (Catholic) missionaries opened a cultural window that permitted Europeans the first truly accurate accounts of the Chinese empire, and introduced to the Chinese things that were new, and things that were not really new, but had been forgotten. As an area of mutual Chinese–European interest, science and scholarship—combined with a shared interest in knowledge and books—became important tools for evangelization in China.

The early Jesuits realized that the Ming empire was a very different place than other mission areas they were engaged in, such as in South America. China was vast and historically ancient, with a highly developed and complex society, government, culture and language. In many ways, China was technologically equal or superior to European society. Chinese respect for books and scholarship had been noted since Marco Polo's day. Jesuits were required to learn to read, write and speak Chinese, a policy referred to as "assimilation". In this context, China was perhaps the most interesting non-European destination for the science-literate Jesuits; the Chinese high regard for books and knowledge matched that of the Jesuits as a whole very well indeed.

The most illustrious of the early Jesuits was Matteo Ricci (利玛竇), widely regarded as the founder of Western sinology. On the whole, however, Jesuits were "Europeans" not sinologists; they took that attitude to China. They reacted as late-humanist, European intellectuals, and they adapted their approach to the Chinese situation. However, they were never fully "assimilated", despite the order's policy to that effect. Obviously, one should differentiate according to the

individual, but as a rule they acted as an “intermediaries” between West and East, despite the sincere interest of several Jesuit missionaries in some aspects of Chinese culture and society.

Based on this premise, Noël Golvers set out to explore the intellectual and spiritual interests of the Jesuits in pre-1770s China, based on their extensive libraries and frequent requests for new and additional books to be sent from the European book markets to China. I recently had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Golvers in person, on a visit to Leuven University (Belgium) in the context of my own interest in the life, work and personality traits of Ferdinand Verbiest, S.J. (南懷仁), one of the earliest Jesuit missionaries to settle in China. I was duly impressed by his carefully voiced opinions on Verbiest as a person, and his clearly extensive background research into the Jesuit mission in the 16th, 17th and 18th Centuries AD. These scholarly qualities are reflected in the care that must have gone into compiling and writing these two heavy volumes. The focus is not so much (or, perhaps I should say, not only) on the collections of European books in China and their provenance, but also—and particularly so—on the people that acquired and/or desired them, the European context and the routes by which the books reached their final destination.

Golvers has clearly gone to great lengths to compile an overview of the spread and penetration of Western books in late-Ming-/early-Qing-dynasty China by means of Jesuit missionaries. This is not an easy feat: although there are good current catalogues of books that were at some point acquired by the order in China, including the so-called “Beitang (北堂) collection” (1949) of extant books, their provenance is not always immediately clear. As such, the author based his study mainly on archival sources (letters, manuscripts, treatises), supplemented with the Beitang collection, especially those books containing an inscription. The historical records are often incomplete and fragmentary, but Golvers has done a careful job at piecing a complex puzzle together—an effort that took him the better part of seven years. The first of this two-volume work contains Chapters 1 through 3 and focuses on the logistics of book acquisition, from the selections made in China, through the role of book agents and donors in Europe, to the delivery routes. His detailed study of the names mentioned in the book inscriptions does not only reveal the identity of the original owners and donors (and thus also of their social circles), but also highlights the mission’s numerous regional support networks, spanning much of contemporary Catholic Europe.

Golvers’ original intent was to provide a comprehensive overview of all titles, both historically referenced and extant in the Beitang collection, but he admits that this proved too much of a task to be feasible. His focus is, therefore, on the sources underlying Verbiest’s work, and he digresses from there systematically. The aspect of his approach that appeals to me most is his emphasis on the “readers” and their personal stories in relation to their work in China. Both volumes provide comprehensive accounts of the context in which both the Jesuits’ books were acquired and their libraries established, but they also cover numerous anecdotes which make both volumes highly readable yet serious scholarly texts. As a physical scientist, I am not used to reading scholarly texts from the humanities, which are usually accompanied by extensive footnotes.

However, once I got used to the discipline's writing style, I found both volumes quite enlightening—and where I wanted more background information, the copious notes provided by the author definitely served that purpose.

The second volume, which comprises Chapter 4 and extensive appendices, continues the story of the circulation of Western books between Europe and China during the 17th and 18th Centuries in the context of the Jesuit missions in Asia. It describes how the missionaries formed their libraries in China, with special emphasis on the strategy of Niccolò Longobardo, initiated in 1610–1611 and implemented by Nicolas Trigault and Johann Schreck Terrentius (“Terrenz”) between 1616 and 1619. Again, Golvers relies extensively on a series of “indirect” sources such as manuscript notations and references from letters to reconstruct the history of the (predominantly) Jesuit libraries in China. In addition to the three main libraries in Beijing (Xitang/Nantang, Dongtang and Beitang), he also discusses the Jesuit collections at Macau, Canton (present-day Guangzhou), Hangzhou and other sites, established in the period between roughly 1600 and the 1820s, when the last Beijing library at Nantang was closed.

Golvers argues that his study reveals a largely neglected chapter of European book and reading history, and that it highlights at the same time a crucial chapter in the intercultural exchange between the late-humanistic Western culture and Chinese culture, in which the printed book played a pivotal role. I think that he has done an excellent job, and I enjoyed perusing both volumes. We are promised a third and final volume in this series at some point in the future, which will describe different classes of Western books, reflecting the domains of interest of both Jesuits and Chinese and the “exchange of knowledge and encounter of ideas” between early modern Europeans and Late Imperial Chinese “literati”. I hope that this final volume will also include a comprehensive concluding chapter, since I miss such a summary (an “executive summary”, if you wish) in the currently available volumes. While the author provides an excellent set-up in the Introduction to volume 1, I would have expected to come across a final, concluding chapter in which the reader would be reminded of the key message Golvers wants us to take away from the large amount of material presented here for digestion. Given the wide-ranging nature of the narrative, this would certainly enhance the accessibility of this otherwise excellent scholarly work. Nevertheless, I highly recommend both current volumes to anyone with a serious interest in European–Chinese intellectual exchange and its historical context.

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