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Conference in Macerata “Inculturation of the Christian Faith and Today’s Chinese Society”

Katharina Wenzel-Teuber

Translated by Sr. Jacqueline Mulberge SSpS

The Conference took place from 19–23 October 2022 in Macerata, the birthplace of the Jesuit China missionary Matteo Ricci (Li Madou 利瑪竇, 1552–1610) in the Marche region of Italy. One of the main purposes of the conference was to provide an exchange platform for young Chinese Catholic scholars, especially those theologians and philosophers who are currently researching or working in Europe. For there is still comparatively little research on the Catholic Church in China, especially on contemporary issues. The conference was organised by the Macerata-based Li Madou Study Centre, which is directed by Chinese theologians, and the China-Zentrum in Sankt Augustin; it was financially supported by Aid to the Church in Need and the Institute of Missiology of *missio e.V.* This was already the 15th symposium of this kind for the Li Madou Study Centre. Among the



The heads of Matteo Ricci (left) and Xu Guangqi, surrounded by symbols of their work, adorned the poster of the symposium in Macerata (detail). It was designed by Chinese students of the Academy of Fine Arts of Macerata.

participants were approx. 50 scholars from Italy, France, Spain, Belgium, Austria, Germany and the Vatican, most of them Chinese, but also some Europeans and one Congolese. The lectures were given in Chinese or English.

Bishop Nazzareno Marconi of Macerata attended the Conference opening, together with representatives of the city government – a sign that the legacy of their son Matteo Ricci, namely dialogue with China, is important to both the spiritual and secular circles of the city. In his address Bishop Marconi asked the fundamental question, whether the Christian faith is just a faith that can therefore enter into all cultures or whether it is a culture in itself? Both approaches were taken very early in the history of the Church and, according to Marconi, found some equilibrium in Augustine's work *The City of God*. – More words of greeting were delivered by **Martin Welling SVD** of the China-Zentrum and by the Cardinal Vicar for the Diocese of Rome, **Angelo De Donatis**.

A very fundamental question was raised right at the beginning of the conference by **Zbigniew Wesołowski SVD** (Monumenta Serica Institute, Sankt Augustin). He spoke about “Xi Jinping's *Zongjiao Zhongguohua* (Chinazation of Religion) and the Christian Idea of Inculturation.” According to Wesołowski, the “Chinazation” (the speaker preferred this translation of *Zhongguohua* to the more common “Sinicization”) called for by Xi Jinping differs from Christian understanding of inculturation in the source of authority, in the way of implementation – inculturation in the history of Christianity has always been a natural process – and in its ultimate objective. (The text of Fr. Wesołowski's lecture is included in this issue of *Religion & Christianity in Today's China*).

Liu Ruomin 刘若民 (Mission Academy of the University of Hamburg) also dealt with the question of Sinicization, namely the “Sinicization of Religions from the Perspective of Chinese Protestants” (中国基督徒的视角理解“宗教中国化”). Among other things he compared the religions in China to people riding on a sloping merry-go-round – State and society. They can only maintain their balance if they adapt themselves to the speed of the wheel and synchronize their rhythm and speed with everyone else's on the wheel, thus becoming one with it.

Some of the talks approached the topic of inculturation of the Christian faith from a historical perspective.

Sun Xuyi 孙旭义 of Li Madou Study Centre spoke on “The Deep Friendship between Xu Guangqi and Matteo Ricci as a Model for Evangelization Today – True Friendship Comes from God, is Rooted in the Divine Word and Matures in Human Nature” (当代福传的楷模, 徐利的深厚友谊—真正的友情源自天主, 扎根于圣言, 生活于人性内). He concluded that the unprejudiced, culturally open-minded kind of friendship between the statesman Xu (1562–1633), a convert to Christianity, and Ricci, which also included their shared enthusiasm for the Gospel, could be exemplary, especially today in the age of globalization and mobility.

Paolo Sabbatini (Brussels) who was in China as a diplomat, spoke on the topic “Cultural Diplomacy Today, a Legacy of Father Matteo Ricci.” He paid tribute to Ricci and his confreres in China as the forerunners of today's New Public Diplomacy, because as non-statesmen they established contacts by cultural means to gain influence in their host country.

Qian Jin 钱晋 (Université Paris 1 – Panthéon-Sorbonne) introduced his studies on another significant Catholic-Confucian convert of the late Ming period, Yang Tingyun (1562–1627). In his talk, “Yang Tingyun: a Chinese Scholar between Chinese and Western Tradition” (杨廷筠: 在中西传统之间的中国文人), Qian compared two of Yang’s apologetic texts and used specific textual examples to show how Yang made and justified his decision to embrace the Christian faith from his rootedness in the Confucian tradition.

In his contribution “From Matteo Ricci’s Accommodation to the Observations on the Modern Method of Evangelization (1929) by Blessed Paolo Manna: Centuries of Incoherent Missionary Policy and the Future of Mission,” **Gianni Criveller PIME** (Studio Teologico Internazionale del PIME, Monza) described how in memoranda on the mission to China over the centuries individual Church representatives unsuccessfully called for reforms such as indigenous bishops, the use of Chinese in the liturgy, etc. According to Criveller the damage caused by this failure to implement inculturation can still be felt.

François-Régis Moreau (Communauté Saint-Martin, Evron, France) went back to the beginnings of Christianity in China in his contribution, “The Enculturation of Christian Faith in China in the Middle-Age: The Example of the Assyrian Church of the East.” Alongside better known witnesses of Christian presence in China from the 7th century onward, he presented an enigmatic archaeological find that was only discovered in 2009: the “Mirror of Xuzhou.” According to Moreau, this bronze mirror was dated to around 200 AD. It bears a circular inscription that some experts interpret as Christian. Moreau reported that the results of their research were presented in October 2021 at the annual meeting of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences.

“*Truly Chinese, Truly Christian: An Exploration of the ronghe yu huitong – The Inculturation Model of Archbishop Stanislaus Lo Kuang*” was the topic of the talk of **Paulin Batairwa Kubuya SX** (Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican). Lo Kuang (Luo Guang) 罗光 (1911–2004) came from Hunan. Trained in Rome, the wish grew in Lo during his teaching career there, to introduce to Europeans Chinese philosophy and religions which he presented in the categories of scholastic theology. Later, from the 1960s on as Archbishop of Taipei in Taiwan, he continued to develop his concept of the encounter and fusion between East and West, which he called *ronghe yu huitong* 融合与会通. At the end of his lecture, Paulin invited the theologians from Mainland China in the audience to look into the legacy of Lo Kuang and other theologians from Taiwan, who had explored new ways of inculturating Christianity in the second half of the 20th century. (Fr. Paulin’s lecture has already appeared online in *Religion & Christianity in Today’s China* 2022, No. 4, pp. 21-40).

An arc from history to the present was made by **Jing Baolu** 靖保路 (Li Madou Study Centre / Holy Spirit Seminary, Hong Kong) in his talk on “The Experience of the early Christians with the Inculturation of the Faith as Inspiration for Christians in China Today” (初期基督徒的信仰本地化经验对今日中国基督徒的启发). According to Jing, early Christianity was able to spread successfully in the Roman Empire because it offered answers to problems that occupied the people of those times. Likewise, Chinese Christians today should respond with their own experience of faith and existence to the spiritual needs of the people and the ethical crisis in China – this, according to Jing, is the

process of inculturating the Christian faith. He advocated the development of a “Chinese political theology.” (A German translation of Jing Baolu’s lecture has already appeared in *China heute* 2022, No. 4, pp. 232-242).

Zhang Zinan 张子男 (Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium) contributed the topic of “Research on St. Augustine in Mainland China from the Point of View of Modernity” (现代性视野中的中国大陆奥思定研究). He provided a knowledgeable and critical overview of the various phases and trends in the wide-ranging reception of Augustine among Chinese scholars, in particular Augustine’s treatise about time. According to Zhang, comparative studies are also carried out (comparisons with Dong Zhongshu, Xunzi and other Chinese thinkers), but there is also much misunderstanding regarding Augustine. Zhang argued for a holistic, interdisciplinary Augustine-research that sees Augustine as a person and also includes his theology in particular. According to Zhang, however, the latter is largely marginalised in Chinese Augustine-research.

Other contributions combined concepts of traditional Chinese philosophy with Christianity. Thus **Zhao Weiya** 赵维雅 (Pontifical Urban University, Rome) spoke on the topic “*Ren'ai* as Inspiration for the Inculturation of the Gospel in China” (“仁爱”在福音本地化中的启发). According to this religious sister, the terms *ren* 仁 (humanity, benevolence) in the Confucian-Chinese context and *ai* 爱 (love) in the Christian context stand respectively for the most fundamental values of human life. Since the human being (*ren* 人) and the ethical concept of humanity (*ren*) play a central role in Chinese culture, the concept of *ren* 仁 – especially in combination with the term *ai* to *ren'ai* 仁爱 (charity, universal love) – is according to Zhao a suitable point of departure to bring the gospel to Chinese people.

In his talk “Taiji Union Spirituality: A Model of Interculturation” (太极合一灵修: 一个文化互化的典范) Ren Andao 任安道 (Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium) presented the creative application of a traditional Chinese concept in connection with modern psychology to the spiritual praxis of today’s Chinese Christians. The Taiji spirituality developed by Gong Yan 龚岩 is about achieving a mental and spiritual state of balance and union of *yin* and *yang*. With the help of a diagram that concretely describes all possible psychic and spiritual states, which Gong Yan calls the “psychological compass,” man can realize the “location of the self” in the “coordinates of the mind,” and through eight steps of prayer, he can achieve transformation and integration, that is, union with God, which Gong Yan also calls “Taiji union.” According to Ren Andao, Gong Yan and his team have trained nearly 7,000 people since 2012, including 2,100 religious women (almost half of all Chinese Sisters), 273 priests (almost one-tenth of Chinese priests), 227 seminarians (nearly half of all Chinese seminarians), 3,096 Chinese lay persons and 1,300 non-Christian psychologists in his spirituality.

In his contribution “The Gift of Wisdom and the Exercise of Synodality: a ‘Vertical’ Interculturation for the Development of the Chinese Catholic Theology,” **Antonio Olmi OP** (Facoltà Teologica dell’ Emilia-Romagna) elucidated, based on fundamental differences in Western and Chinese thought, the difficulty of assessing which terms from the Chinese tradition are suitable for describing the Christian faith. Olmi concludes that since on a horizontal level Western and Chinese thinking cannot judge each other, concepts of Chinese Catholic theology can only be incorporated into the teaching of the universal

Church on a vertical level by a synod of the whole Church with the wisdom given to it by God.

The following talks without any direct connection to Christianity in China were also well worth listening to: **Zhang Liang** 张亮 (Catholic University of Louvain), “An Interpretation of the Infinity of God and Man in Gregory of Nyssa” (解读尼撒的额我略之神性无限与人性无限); **Wang Zhenjiang** 王振江 (Pontifical University of Santa Croce, Rome), “Relational Theology in the Idea of the ‘Heavenly Father’ in the Childhood Story of Jesus According to Matthew” (“天父”印象中的关系神学—据玛窦版童年史所载); **Li Haiyan** 李海燕 (University of Bonn); “Trends in the Inculturation of Early Christianity in the ‘Acts of the Apostles’” (浅析《宗徒大事录》视野下的早期基督徒福音本地化走向); **Liu Chuang** 刘创 (Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome), “The Significance of the *communio*-Theology for the Inculturation of the Faith” (共融神学对信仰本地化的启示). Unfortunately, the second Protestant lecture of the Conference, “Examples of Inculturation in Chinese Christian Art and Architecture” by **Isabel Friemann** (China InfoStelle, Hamburg) could not be held as the lecturer was prevented from attending at short notice.

The conference proceedings contain a further 19 texts that were submitted but were not presented. The majority of the conference papers is to be published in Chinese in the journal 天主教思想与文化 (*Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*). Individual lectures will also appear in *China heute* and in *Religions & Christianity in Today's China*.

The meeting took place in a lively and sometimes emotional atmosphere. The social programme included a pilgrimage to the Marian shrine of Loreto and a short visit to the old town of Macerata. There you can see two houses that are said to be Matteo Ricci's place of birth and visit the Jesuit college that he attended until he left his hometown for good at the age of 14. Today it houses the magnificent city library with its collection of antique books, as well as an exhibition that pays tribute to the sons of the city and the region who were connected to China.

This conference report was first published in *China heute* 2022, No. 4, pp. 212-214 (in German).