

Reshaping the Boundaries

*The Christian Intersection of China
and the West in the Modern Era*

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Boundary-Crossing Words, Beliefs, and Experiences

Late Imperial China's Encounter with the Modern West

Song Gang

The rise of China as a leading power in today's world has attracted increasing scholarly attention to the country's encounter with the West (primarily referring to Europe and North America in this volume) in the modern era, i.e., from the late sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries. While more recent research began to shift away from the model of a tradition-modernity polarity in explaining late imperial Chinese history, new approaches have been proposed to explore a broader range of subjects tied with the richly documented exchanges between China and the West since the sixteenth century. However, there is still a lack of collaborative effort to examine how Western culture, long shaped by the dominant Christian religion, was conceptualized and imagined by late imperial Chinese people, and vice versa, how Confucian-based Chinese culture was understood and interpreted in modern Europe and North America. Indeed, the multilayered two-way flows of words, beliefs, and experiences in such a significant cross-cultural encounter open up intriguing possibilities for further investigation. This volume, which consists of seven studies, presents cutting-edge research on the formation and transformation of different types of knowledge, perceptions, and representations exchanged between China and the West through the modern period. It aims to shed new light and provide refreshing perspectives for future exploration of related subjects in this field.

The findings in this volume suggest a process of boundary-crossing interactions between Chinese and Western cultures. On the one hand, some long-standing ideologies, religious beliefs, and cultural tastes have been modified or redefined due to Chinese people's more frequent contacts with Westerners. Whether they were emperors, officials, literati, or peasants, they often moved beyond conventional thinking to try to make sense of Western religion and culture. In this respect, David Francis Urrows, Ji Li, and Anthony Clark unfold an impressive list of new boundaries drawn by those Chinese who reinterpreted traditional thoughts, built regional, national as well as transnational networks, and promoted expedient means of interpersonal and intercultural adaptations. On the other hand, the stereotyped Sinocentric mentality (embedded in such terms as *Tianxia* 天下 and *Hua-Yi* 華夷) continued to carry a heavy

load of cultural imperatives that frequently challenged the thoughts and behaviors of Western (including Russian) missionaries, Sinologists, and artists. They also felt the urgent need to mark new religious, ethical, and aesthetic boundaries of self-identity when meeting with Chinese people and their unyielding cultural pride. This aspect receives particular attention in the studies of Thijs Weststeijn, Nikolay Samoylov, John T. P. Lai, and Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, who carefully examine a number of missionary sources to measure the limits of transcultural understandings at spiritual, intellectual, and ideological levels.

A reader may keenly notice the interweaving of both Chinese and Western perspectives in this volume. The syncretic approach resists a simple alignment with the established theories, and it sets a framework in which the contributors can fully address the distinctive feature of “in-betweenness” embedded in a variety of boundary-crossing words, beliefs, and experiences. This key concept, frequently seen in literary criticisms, translation studies, and cross-cultural studies, also helps advance our understanding of the historical encounter between China and the West in three significant aspects. First, it entails more room for comprehensive research, thereby avoiding the limitations of some influential theories and methodological models, e.g., the “Eurocentric approach” (with its critique *Orientalism*), the “impact and response” thesis, the “China-centered approach,” and the “transmission” and the “reaction” frameworks. For Catholic missions in late imperial China, for example, it was not always the case that missionaries played a role as the *transmitters* while the Chinese were the *receivers*. As Ji Li has convincingly argued, the roles could be reversed when Chinese Christians managed to have their voices heard in Europe. In addition, largely due to the reshaped boundaries, messages being transmitted between different locations and through different media could be altered at various degrees in the process and therefore not be complete or faithful to the original meanings and purposes. Second, the “in-between” feature highlights the interactiveness and interdependence that characterized the contacts between China and the West in early modern history. It would be a questionable claim that the encounter of China and the West between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, often seen as a period of reciprocal influences, came to an end in 1800, while hostile confrontations incurred by Western arrogance and Chinese humiliation dominated Sino-Western relations through the nineteenth century. The observation overlooks the subtlety of some cases highlighted in this volume, e.g., a Protestant missionary may use the traditional Chinese concept of ideal society to promote his model image of the West, or there could be self-contradictory expressions of modernity in late Qing missionary publications. These cases suggest that the key actually lies in how the participants responded to an “in-between” situation when defining new ideological, religious, and cultural boundaries in reality. Third, the reshaping of boundaries not only embodied dynamic transcultural experiences, but they also marked new public and private spheres without fixed borders between traditional and modern, native

and foreign, or central and marginal. By means of official records, personal letters, musical instruments, news reports, translated texts, rumors, and miracle stories, the new spheres enabled the participants to interact with each other in expansive networks and produce many “in-between” thoughts, images, and identities, neither Chinese nor Western by nature. Considering the above three aspects, we should focus on the “in-between” feature as the key in our investigation of the boundary-crossing cases, which in many ways affected late imperial Chinese history and modern Western history.

The contributors of this volume are experts in history, religious studies, music history, as well as cultural studies. They not only display pioneering research on subjects that have not been fully digested in previous research, but also make effective use of existing and newly found sources to reconstruct the “in-between” experiences of Chinese and Western peoples in the modern era. Their studies represent different areas of interests, but they share the same concern about how ideological, religious, and cultural boundaries may have been reshaped on both sides in the Sino-Western encounter.

The volume is organized into seven chapters. In Chapter 1, Thijs Weststeijn presents a penetrating survey of the multilayered cultural exchanges between China and the Low Countries during the seventeenth century. Traders and missionaries from the remote place of the “red-haired barbarians” became regular visitors to the Middle Kingdom and the South China Sea in this period. The intermediary role of the Low Countries travelers in transacting cultural products between the two ends of the world depended on a fortuitous combination of factors: the global “Jesuit information network” was complemented with and sometimes catalyzed by the interests of the Dutch trading company. Bearing in mind the recent studies on early modern Netherlandish Jesuitica, Weststeijn is keen enough to pay attention to the significant work of a group of Jesuit missionaries from the Low Countries, such as Nicolas Trigault, Philippe Couplet, and Ferdinand Verbiest. Their voyages and writings, involving publishers from the Dutch Republic, contributed to the vital exchange of knowledge. Weststeijn’s research on European Sinology and humanistic scholarship also gives him a solid footing to analyze Sino-Dutch exchanges in linguistic and philological terms: the Jesuits’ introduction of the Chinese writing system was consciously adopted and fantasized by European scholars in their search for a universal script. Meanwhile, the Jesuits’ collaborative translation of Confucian classics in *Confucius Sinarum philosophus* disclosed a carefully reinterpreted version of Confucianism filtered through the Christian truth, and it aroused a series of later translations and commentaries bouncing between ancient Chinese wisdom and post-Renaissance humanism. In his analysis on visual arts and historiography, Weststeijn provides more examples of similar boundary-crossing experiences. He concludes the chapter by reflecting on a contrast between the Dutch lead in European cultural engagements with China through the seventeenth century and the loss of that legacy in the following eighteenth century.

In Chapter 2, Nikolay Samoylov presents a parallel study on Sino-Russian encounters from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. He first brings forward critical reflections on the four-stage process—*indifferent interaction, identification, activation, and adaptation*—which to him should characterize the increasing contacts between China and Russia over a period of two hundred years. In this process, he highlights the key role of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Beijing, the unofficial embassy of Russia and outpost of the Russian Orthodox Church in China, for transmitting abundant social-cultural information between the two neighboring empires. Samoylov mentions an intriguing example: the Russian missionaries and the Qing Chinese simultaneously adopted Buddhist terminology to identify the country Russia and the Christian religion. It reminds us of a similar appropriation of the Buddhist identity by the first Jesuits in South China in the late sixteenth century. We also see that, despite the claim to present a “real” image of China, the Russian missionaries apparently infused personal opinions and emotions in their works. The prominent Sinologist Archimandrite Iakinf (Bichurin), for example, staged a costume show in the literary salons of St. Petersburg to signal his close association with Confucian intelligentsia, and he created an idealistic, admirable image of China in political, legal, and educational terms. Though the diplomatic twist gradually wore off the spiritual passion of the missionaries, they made noticeable contributions to the growth of early Russian Sinology. Moreover, after a close look at such well-known figures as Alexander Pushkin, Vladimir Odoevsky, and Vissarion Belinsky, Samoylov suggests that missionary Sinologists did not really achieve unanimous support as they had wished. Rather, there appeared diverse and even conflicting perceptions of China among Russian intellectuals. In their works, they did not represent China as it was but as what they expected it to be—a romantic utopia at one time yet a stagnant autocracy at another. As it turned out, China has been consciously reinterpreted as a symbolic mirror image for them to reflect upon the reality in Russia.

Following Weststeijn’s and Samoylov’s sweeping surveys, David Francis Urrows in his chapter investigates a handful of Ming-Qing sources (and Korean sources in Chinese) on the pipe organ, thus adding a special dimension to the boundary-crossing experience of Western missionaries and late imperial Chinese people. As a cultural commodity, music traveled from early on. Western musical instruments were present when the first Jesuit mission was established in sixteenth-century China, and they were the subject of curiosity and admiration among local Chinese audiences. No instrument better reflected the highest level of Western technology than the pipe organ, the most complex mechanical device in Western culture from antiquity up to the Industrial Revolution. While reading the Chinese accounts on the pipe organ, Urrows affirms that it was precisely the technical and mechanical aspects that excited interest. Aesthetics and music were firmly secondary concerns. In this sense, the pipe organ has been considered a stereotyped icon of Western (Christian) music and in most

cases an exotic instrument in the scientific. What is more important, Urrows argues, lies in the fact that Chinese understandings of this Western object did not take any simple form of exoticism or indifference but rather a mixture of diverse transcultural experiences shifting between intellectual openness and ideological resistance. Consequently, it would be natural for some reputed literati, such as You Tong and Zhao Yi, to reinterpret the “wind-qin” by using a set of normative ideas in classical Chinese poetry and music. And, we would not be surprised at the self-contradictory “bluff” of the Qianlong Emperor regarding things imported from the West. The intriguing intersection of religion, music, and science brought to light a typical Chinese cultural centricity encountering the *otherness* of Western high culture, from which a new mode of in-between existence emerged along the process of dynamic mutual perceptions and evaluations.

While the first three chapters mainly focus on the endeavors of Catholic and Orthodox missionaries in China over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the remaining four chapters in this volume display a more stimulating picture of the nineteenth century. Featured by more frequent conflicts in political, military, and cultural terms, the century witnessed a significant shift in modern Sino-Western relations.

In Chapter 4, John T. P. Lai presents an illuminative study on how Karl F. A. Gützlaff, a leading Protestant missionary to China in the early nineteenth century, consciously created an idealistic image of Great Britain in two of his novels, *Shifei lüelun* (1835) and *Dayingguo tongzhi* (1834). It is noteworthy that Gützlaff in his narratives employed a series of rhetorical devices to change or redefine the traditional boundaries of Chinese and British cultures. On the one hand, through the voice of a Chinese sojourner who had once lived in Britain for years, Gützlaff put forth his challenging points to counterargue the Sinocentric world order deeply rooted in the imperial Chinese mind. The age-old concept *Hua-Yi zhi bian*, which set geopolitical and ethnical divisions between the civilized Chinese people and the uncivilized barbarians, was refuted in the first place. This was paralleled by a direct challenge to China’s long-established tributary system. One could not find any of the alleged devil-like characters among British traders, and instead he would be obliged to admit that they had made great contributions to China’s economy and therefore were no inferior tributary subjects of China, or the “Celestial Empire.” On the other hand, Gützlaff made great efforts in presenting Britain as the “Supreme Nation,” characterized by advanced technology, awe-inspiring military force, efficient legal and parliamentary systems, admirable cultural achievements, and fundamentally, the dominant Christian religion. It is with Lai’s careful analysis of these aspects that we can recognize an impressive list of boundary-crossing expressions and thoughts. For example, Gützlaff borrowed conventional Chinese sayings, including the word for the Four Seas and Mencius’ statement on an ideal society free of hunger and cold, to describe Britain as a paradise-like nation and a superior overlord of its colonies and tributary states worldwide. The conscious

appropriation and exaggeration, Lai argues, aimed to break the boundaries of the old Sinocentric world so that a new model image of the West may be shaped in the Chinese mind. Moreover, Lai points out Gützlaff's omission of some negative aspects, such as King William IV's illegitimate children, social evils, and the opium trade, in order to avoid any Chinese suspicion at the idealistic image of Britain. Motivated by his Eurocentric pride and evangelical zeal, Gützlaff strategically made adaptive and selective reinterpretations on the essential cultural attributes of both countries. The Anglo-Chinese intercourse exhibited a complex destruction–reconstruction process, in which the two-way flow of words and ideas gave shape to one imagined in-between reality to fulfill varied ideological, commercial, and religious motives.

The next two chapters focus on Catholic missions in Liaoning and Shanxi during the late nineteenth century. They arouse no less interest than Gützlaff's symbolic representation of Britain as the "Supreme Nation." In both studies, lower-class Chinese people came to the foreground and played an increasingly decisive role in their negotiations with the Church's religious orthodoxy on the one hand, and the Qing political authority on the other. In Chapter 5, Ji Li first presents a concise survey of the popular devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in France and its introduction to China during the late Qing period. She then analyzes several rarely seen letters, written in 1871 by three Catholic women from a village in Liaozhong County, Liaoning. The letters were addressed to Dominique Maurice Pourquié, a member of the Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris who had worked in Northeast China. Here we come across an exciting case of, perhaps for the first time, rural Chinese Catholic women managing to have their voices heard in Europe. From these original letters, Li detects the underlying sense of feminine piety mingled with the Du women's purposeful borrowing of religious vocabularies to articulate their personal feelings and emotional requests. Such an obvious displacement between the spiritual devotion to Jesus and the sensible attachment to an absent Western priest signifies the new boundary of Christian religiosity being shaped by these village women. When indicating discontent with the institutionalization tendency of another convent, they further played upon subtle sentimental values in the religious discourse by adopting the same spiritual forces of devotion. On this occasion, private writing became an alternative means of self-empowerment for the less privileged Chinese converts to redefine their faith, passion, and collective identity in the turbulent late Qing period.

In Chapter 6, Anthony Clark takes a different angle to explore the drastic change of Chinese views on the Franciscan mission in Shanxi before and after the Boxer Uprising. He makes extensive use of archival sources from late Qing provincial and missionary ecclesial collections to put together a two-sided narrative of what occurred during the fevered pitch of Chinese-Western antagonisms. Compared to the Jesuits' strategic adaptations to Chinese elite culture in the seventeenth century, the Franciscan mission rather followed a not very friendly fundamentalist approach to preaching

among lower-class Chinese people. The increased frictions between the God of the West and indigenous Chinese gods finally led to a great conflict in 1900, one that signaled widespread resistance to Western invasion and control over China. From the words of anti-Christian officials and literati, Clark unfolds their willful misreading of Christianity as a heterodox religion, e.g., bearing a rebellious nature, involving black magic, and destroying the five human relations. He is of the opinion that the Franciscan mission in Shanxi at the turn of the century was largely mystified by late Qing political discourses and cultural mores. Ironically enough, right after the occupation of Beijing by the Eight-Nation Alliance, hostile views were radically changed by the new governor of Shanxi, who upheld the exact opposite stance and claimed Christianity to be an orthodox and victimized religion. By carefully tracing the dramatic fast-changing Chinese views, Clark brings to light another vivid example of how the same religious identity might be misread and represented in a sequence of ideologically sensitive exchanges between the *self* and the *other*.

The last chapter, by Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, concludes this volume with a critical reflection on the complicated notions of modernity propagated through the flourishing Christian print culture in late Qing and early Republican China. The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century encounter between China and the West, Inouye argues, was far more complex than a one-way influx of “modern” products, ideas, or technologies into China. It carried a distinctively in-between character, as can be seen through bidirectional flows of charisma and cultural exchange. As far as Christian print culture is concerned, Western missionaries had introduced modern print technology to China in the first half of the nineteenth century. This advanced technology was not only a symbol of the scientific ethos of rationalistic modernity, but also a convenient and widely utilized tool for propagating charismatic Christian practices such as prayers for particularistic protection, healing, and ecstatic worship. Those miracle stories appeared side by side with the political, economic, and scientific discourses, in the *Church News*, the *Chinese Christian Intelligencer*, and other nationally distributed Christian publications. The coexistence of technological advancements and supernatural experiences easily gave rise to a paradoxical in-between situation, where multiple expressions of modernity (or “competing modernities” in Inouye’s words) could be attached to both old and new ideas frequently crossing the borders of cultural, religious, and material entities. Following her arguments on late Qing Christian printing, Inouye presents further evidence for the overlooked plural form of modernity from yet another angle, i.e., Western missionaries’ adoption of the backward-progressive assumption to draw an imagined boundary between the Christian doctrine and Chinese popular religion. According to Inouye, the true motive behind the missionaries’ vigorous critique of Chinese popular religion was not a modern scientific agenda to root out irrationality and superstition but rather a traditionalist campaign to police the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable expressions of

supernatural belief and practice. Understandably, we come across the ironic juxtaposition of “false” traditional Chinese miracles and “true” Christian miracles, embracing a similar mode of religious efficacy but ending with contradictory appraisals. This, according to Inouye, signals the emergence of a type of in-between space for different and competing ideological paradigms. Through her in-depth analysis of the obvious paradoxes embedded in the late Qing Chinese-Christian encounter, Inouye makes it clear that modernity should not be simply seen as a fixed border between rational/irrational, scientific/superstitious, secular/religious, or other dichotomies. Rather, it involves changeable social-cultural forms, different ways to conceptualize worldly or supernatural experiences, and vital mechanisms that continued to redefine the new boundaries between the *self* and the *other*.

Whether we have already entered into a *glocalized* world remains a subject of considerable discussion and dispute, but the seven studies collected in this volume can give us a glimpse of how the Christian intersection of China and the West in the modern era has undergone a complex process of two-way perceptions, representations, and imaginations. The boundary-crossing words, beliefs, and experiences demonstrated the interactiveness and interdependence of Chinese and Western peoples not only among themselves but also within a larger global community. The distinctive “in-betweenness” of their intercultural exchanges, as these studies suggest, may enlighten further research on the historical formation of today’s world and our multiple understandings of it.

Contributors

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Thijs Weststeijn is professor of art history of the early modern period at Utrecht University, where he chairs the research project *The Chinese Impact: Images and Ideas of China in the Dutch Golden Age* (2014–19). He has published widely on Dutch art of the seventeenth century, including *Art and Antiquity in the Netherlands and Britain: The Vernacular Arcadia of Franciscus Junius (1591–1677)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015).

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