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The “Beijing Experience” of Eighteenth-Century French Jesuits

A Discussion Centered on *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*

Abstract: Of the European Jesuit missionaries who went to China during the eighteenth century, the French Jesuits were a notable group. The Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères (Edifying and Curious Letters Written from Foreign Missions), a collection of these missionaries’ correspondences, revealed how the Jesuits described their impression of the city Beijing and the imperial court, their religious activities, and their scientific works. These descriptions played a role in shaping the Europeans’ view of China, contributing to the rise of “chinoiserie” in eighteenth-century Europe.

French Jesuits dominated the West’s “Beijing experience” during the eighteenth century. Whether in terms of the numbers of French Jesuits who came to China’s capital and the important roles they played there, or in terms of the weight carried by the historical

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Notes renumbered for this edition.—Ed.

materials they passed down regarding the “Beijing experience,” the French Jesuits had a marked advantage over the other Western missionaries who came to Beijing. Unlike the missionaries of other countries, who were closely linked to the Roman Catholic Church, the French Jesuits were their own entity, maintaining a separate internal network of well-organized relationships and communications.

The materials on the eighteenth-century French Jesuits’ “Beijing experience” are primarily held within three monumental works: Jean-Baptiste du Halde’s (1674–1743) *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l’empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise, enrichie des cartes générales et particulières de ces pays, de la carte générale et des cartes particulières du Thibet, et de la Corée; et ornée d’un grand nombre de figures et de vignettes gravées en taille-douce* (Geographical, Historical, Chronological, Political, and Physical Description of the Empire of China and Chinese Tartary, Enriched by General and Specific Maps of That Country, by a General Map and Specific Maps of Tibet and Korea, and Ornamented with Numerous Engraved Illustrations and Vignettes); and *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères: mémoires de la Chine*; and *Mémoires concernant l’histoire, les sciences, les arts, les mœurs, les usages, etc., des chinois, par les missionnaires de Peking* (Memoirs on the History, Science, Arts, Manners, Usages, etc. of the Chinese, by the Missionaries of Beijing), jointly compiled by Gabriel Brotier (1723–1789), Joseph Guignes (1721–1810), and Antoine Isaac Sylvestre de Sacy (1758–1838).¹ *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères* has the most historical value and is thus the most important. In writing *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur les Jésuites de l’ancienne mission de Chine, 1552–1773* (Biographical and Bibliographical Notes on the Jesuits from the Old China Mission, 1552–1773), the French author Louis Pfister included lengthy extracts from *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères* and meticulously summarized its biographies of various figures.² In the preface to the Chinese translation of *Répertoire des Jésuites de Chine de 1552 à 1800* (Directory of Jesuits in China, 1552–1800), Joseph Dehergne, SJ, also mentions that he submitted a paper to the

1973 Twenty-Ninth Congress of Orientalists in Paris titled “Appeal for the Publication of an Authentic Edition of the Correspondence on China in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*”; in addition, Dehergne published “A Discussion of *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l’empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise*.”³ These articles demonstrate the high degree of importance Dehergne placed on this pair of monumental works. Among Chinese scholars, the first to conduct a focused study of these documents was Yan Zonglin 阎宗临: in his early years in France, Yan wrote a Ph.D. dissertation, “Works and Essays by du Halde,” which systematically studied and drew a great deal on *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l’empire de la Chine* and *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*. Recently, two works—*From the First Contact Between China and the West to the Chinese Rites Controversy—Ming-Qing Missionaries and Sino-Western Cultural Exchanges* (从中西初识到礼仪之争—明清传教士与中西文化交流 Cong Zhongxi chushi dao liyi zhi zheng—Ming-Qing chuanjiao shi yu Zhongxi wenhua jiaoliu) by Zhang Guogang 张国刚, and *The History of the Early Stages of European Sinology—Sino-Western Cultural Exchanges and the Rise of Western Sinology* (欧洲早期汉学史—中西文化交流与西方汉学的兴起 Ouzhou zaoqi hanxue shi—Zhongxi wenhua jiaoliu yu Xifang hanxue de xingqi), by Zhang Xiping 张西平—similarly offer incisive and expert discussions of *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l’empire de la Chine* and *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*, though the space devoted to these discussions is fairly brief.

In addition to these three monumental works and collections, the French Jesuits kept a large quantity of additional historical materials: one example is the letters of Antoine Gabil, which R. Simon collected in *Correspondance de Peking, 1722–1759* (Letters from Peking, 1722–1759), published in 1970 by Librairie Droz in Geneva: the work contains 342 letters in all. Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730) and Dominique Parrenin (1665–1741) also wrote many letters: in 1759, the mathematician, physicist, and president

of the Paris Academy of Sciences de Mairan, who corresponded with Parrenin a great deal, published *Lettres de M. de Mairan au R.P. Parrenin* (Letters from M. de Mairan to R.P. Parrenin [Paris: Desaint et Saillant, 1759]); this book was twice reprinted in 1770 and 1782. The second volume of Virgile Pinot's *La Chine et la formation de l'esprit philosophique en France (1640–1740)* (China and the Formation of the Philosophical Spirit in France, 1640–1740), *Documents inédits relatifs à la connaissance de la Chine en France* (Unpublished Documents Regarding the Knowledge of China in France), included a selection of unpublished letters by Jean-François Foucquet (1665–1741) and Nicolas Freret (1688–1749).⁴ Many unpublished documents are currently stored in the Vatican, Paris, and other European archives. Claudi von Collani's *P. Joachim Bouvet SJ: Sein Leben und sein Werk* (The Life and Work of Joachim Bouvet, SJ), Yves de Thomaz de Bossière's *Jean-François Gerbillon SJ, 1654–1707: mathématicien de Louis XIV, premier supérieur général de la Mission française de Chine* (Jean-François Gerbillon SJ: 1654–1707: Louis XIV's Mathematician, First Superior General of the French Mission to China), John W. Witek's *Controversial Ideas in China and in Europe: A Biography of Jean-François Foucquet SJ (1665–1741)*, and other such works have all discovered and utilized the unpublished archives on French Jesuits stored across Europe.

This article primarily examines *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères* in an effort to explore the French Jesuits' rich "Beijing experience" as revealed by the text. Based on the French Jesuits' *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*, their "Beijing experience" primarily comprises three types of content: first, observations of the city of Beijing and faithful records of various scenes, among which records of Beijing disasters and earthquakes have special historical value. The second type includes records of or reports on their life and work in Beijing, especially their relationship with the Qing court, their missionary activities in the capital, and their involvement in scientific and artistic exchanges; these offer key data for the history of contemporary Sino-Western cultural exchanges. The third type is their evaluations of the strength of Chinese politics, economy,

culture, sciences, and the military via their “city reading” of Beijing, as well as their multifaceted comparisons of China and the West, which had a quite important impact on French intellectuals, the then contemporary Enlightenment, and even the whole of Western society, significantly informing the Western image of China. *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères* has quite important historical value. There is a direct relationship between eighteenth-century European “Chinoiserie” and the French Jesuits’ colorfully exaggerated descriptions of Beijing in their correspondence and reports.

Overview of the French Jesuits Who Visited Beijing in the Eighteenth Century

Based on research into *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur les Jésuites de l’ancienne mission de Chine, 1552–1773*, by Louis Pfister, and *Répertoire des jésuites de Chine de 1552 à 1800*, by Joseph Dehergne, the French Jesuits first arrived in Beijing in 1688; by the eighteenth century, nine remained. A total of forty-three French Jesuits visited the capital in the eighteenth century: most of these figures simultaneously played the roles of theologian, scientist, and artist. They accounted for approximately one-half of all the Western Jesuits who came to Beijing during this period.

Of the French Jesuits who came to Beijing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, nine died and were buried in the private Zhalan Cemetery, while twenty-five were buried in the public Jesuit cemetery at Zhengfu Temple. Buried in Beijing cemeteries, these Jesuits became historical witnesses to Sino-French cultural exchanges in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

During the eighteenth century, forty-nine Jesuits from other countries came to Beijing. Of these, twenty-two were from Portugal, eleven from Italy, five from Austria, five from Bohemia, four from Germany, one from Switzerland, and one from Belgium. In addition, five people arrived in Beijing in the seventeenth century and still remained in the capital in the eighteenth century: Philip-pus Maria Grimaldi (Italy [1639–1712]), Thomas Pereira (Portugal [1645–1708]), Joseph Suarez (Portugal [1656–1736]), Antoine

Thomas (Belgium [1644–1709]), and Kilian Stumpf (Germany [1655–1720]). Jesuits from Portugal and Italy accounted for a significantly lower proportion of the total during the eighteenth century in comparison with the previous century: this trend ran contrary to the increasing proportion occupied by French Jesuits.

In a letter to Père Toussaint-Dassault dated November 1, 1743, the French Jesuit Jean Denis Attiret (1702–1768) discussed the situation of Jesuits in Beijing: “We thus have in total three churches and twenty-two Jesuits: ten Frenchmen reside in our French mission; a total of twelve reside in the other missions, including Portuguese, Italians, and Germans.” This was the general situation when the number of Jesuits in Beijing reached its peak: there were only twenty-two people in all.

During the eighteenth century, other Western Christian sects were active in Beijing, including the Franciscans, the Lazarists, and the Catholic Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples: however, their numbers were far fewer than those of the Jesuits.

Zheng Dedi wrote in the preface to the Chinese edition of *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*: “According to the statistics in Louis Pfister’s work *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur les Jésuites de l’ancienne mission de Chine, 1552–1773*, between 1552 and 1687 Jesuits in China produced sixty-nine Sinological works by twenty-eight authors. Among these, the two nations of Portugal and Italy had far superior numbers, whether in terms of authors or works. During that time, in that sphere, Jesuits of French nationality lagged significantly behind the above two nations. Between 1687 and 1773, however, the situation changed fundamentally: during this period, Jesuits in China produced 353 Sinological works by fifty-five authors; 64 percent of these authors were French Jesuits, who produced 83 percent of the total number of works. We can see that during this period, in this sphere, French Jesuits occupied an overwhelmingly superior position. France gradually became the center of European Sinological studies and the provider of knowledge on China.” This is a fairly accurate summary.

The French Jesuits made Beijing the center of their activities, so Beijing naturally became their center for communications and the

transmission of intelligence; *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères* testifies to this point. *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères* is a collection of 152 letters in all, 69 of which were directly posted from Beijing. Although the rest were not posted from Beijing, they address many issues related to Beijing. Beijing was truly the center of contemporary Sino-French cultural exchanges.

The French Jesuits' decision to treat Beijing as the center of their activities and their prominent position among other Western Jesuits in Beijing is closely related to the mission established by the French Jesuits. In 1684, in Paris, Philippe Couplet (1623–1693) suggested that Louis XIV dispatch an envoy to China: France then began training and selecting missionaries to go to China. In 1685, six men were dispatched to China: Louis le Comte (1655–1728), Jean-François Gerbillon, Joachim Bouvet, Jean de Fontaney (1643–1710), Claude de Visdelou (1656–1737), and Guy Tachard (1651–1712). The party of five “king’s mathematicians” arrived in Beijing in early February 1688. During their stay in Beijing, the French missionaries gained the trust of the Kangxi emperor (b. 1654; r. 1661–1722) through their own efforts and were granted residence. When Fontaney returned to France in 1699, the superior general of the Jesuits, Tirso González de Santalla (1624–1705), appointed him the superior of the French mission, with the powers of the vice provincial superior. On November 30, 1700, Gerbillon was appointed first superior of the French Jesuit mission in China. This marked the official inauguration of the French mission. The long letter that the French Jesuit Fontaney sent to Père François Lachaise (1624–1709), dated February 15, 1703, reviewed in detail the experiences of French Jesuits in China in the seventeenth century, as well as the story of the establishment of the French mission. Twelve superiors served at the French mission altogether, eight of whom served as missionaries in Beijing, including Gerbillon (the first superior); François Xavier d’Entrecolles (the second [1664–1741]); Cyr Contancin (the fourth [1670–1732]); Valentin Chaliier (the seventh [1697–1747]); Jean-Baptiste de la Roche (the eleventh [1704–1784]); and their successors, François Bourgeois (1723–1792), Jean Joseph Marie Amiot (1718–1793), and Jean

Matthieu Ventavon (1753–1787). The establishment of the French mission played a decisive role in promoting the development of French missionary work in China.

French Jesuits' Tasks in China

On September 15, 1684, Philippe Couplet was recommended to Louis XIV and soon after was sent as an envoy to China. The Academy of Sciences responded to the request of François Michel Le Tellier, marquis de Louvois, by writing a detailed checklist which was to be given to Couplet prior to dispatching the group of Jesuit mathematicians to China. This catalogue of issues was in reality the tasks that the French appointed for the Jesuits sent to China: it reflected the concerns of contemporary France and even Europe as a whole.

The concerns listed in this checklist were far from being restricted to missionary work: the content encompassed politics, economics, culture, military, science and technology, natural resources, geography, and history; it was essentially a general survey and exhaustive study of the conditions in China. In examining *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*, which was published some time later, these issues in actuality pervaded every facet of French Jesuits' activities in China and constituted the primary content of the discussions in their letters.

Aside from gathering data through personal observations, the Jesuits obtained information through another important channel, a type of newspaper circulated internally within the government—"official gazettes." In his letters, Cyr Contancin revealed that he "obtained much information" via this channel.

Route, Time, and Location on the Way to Beijing

The French Jesuits' general route to Beijing involved setting out from France, traversing the Cape of Good Hope, and passing through the Indian Ocean, the Strait of Malacca, and the South China Sea to arrive at Macao or Guangzhou in China. The journey took about half a year. This is recorded in several places in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*.

In a letter dated February 17, 1699, from Père Joseph de Prémare (1666–1736) to Père Lachaise, Prémare discussed his party's voyage to China: "We finally arrived in China after a seven-month journey, as we set out from La Rochelle on March 7, 1698, and dropped anchor at Shangchuan Island on October 6. From these seven months, we should deduct the more than twenty days we were delayed at the Cape of Good Hope, Aceh, Malacca, and two or three uninhabited islands; this time could have been better spent."

A letter from Prémare to Charles le Gobien (1653–1708) dated November 1, 1700, again touched on the journey from France to China and the amount of time it required: "As long as one set out from France in late December or early January, the voyage to this place should take at most a mere six months. In Guangzhou, we saw a British ship that had traveled here from Europe in only five months." A letter written by Pierre-Vincent de Tartre (1669–1721) to his father and dated December 17, 1701, also referred to the time spent at sea: "After a seven- or eight-month sea voyage, beset by perils and exhausted, I finally arrived in China." This letter gives a detailed description of the group's experiences during the journey.

Emeric Langlois de Chavagnac (1670–1717), who arrived in China on the same ship, discussed similar circumstances in a letter to Père Charles le Gobien dated December 30, 1701. However, he gives a different account of the amount of time spent on the voyage: "On July 29, after only four and a half months, we were extremely lucky to arrive at a place that was two days' journey from Macao." If his words are true, this was the shortest recorded journey between France to China. Up to the late eighteenth century, journeys from Europe to China generally required approximately half a year.

After the Jesuits disembarked at Guangzhou, or after they entered Guangdong via Macao, they proceeded north to Beijing via land routes. Such travel usually required special permission from the emperor, though the emperor would sometimes exempt travelers from the various taxes they had to pay when going ashore and would even provide them with travel expenses for the route from Guangdong to Beijing.

The journey from Macao to Beijing took approximately three

months' time. A discussion of the route to Beijing dated October 15, 1780, penned by Jacques François Dieudonné Ollières (1722–1780), can verify this point: “In mid-March 1760, we set out for the capital of China; after a three-month journey over land and water, we arrived at the capital on June 6.”

In the seventeenth century, the French Jesuits had only two residences in China, one of which was in Beijing. François Noël (1651–1729) discussed the situation of churches in Beijing in his report to the superior of the General Curia of the Jesuits in Rome: “We have three churches in Beijing, yet this is still not sufficient. Once we have the funds we require, we will construct a fourth church in the eastern part of the city. Construction expenses are not nearly as high as in Europe: the labor and materials here are quite inexpensive. We wish to dedicate the fourth church to the patron saint of our mission, Saint Joseph, and hope that God may enable the ardent servants of this mighty saint to raise the funds to construct it.”

The Gates, Walls, Streets, and Districts of Beijing in *Lettres*

When any Jesuit entered Beijing, the first thing to meet his eyes would be Beijing's city gates, walls, streets, and districts. These structures made a deep impression on the Jesuits.

Jean de Fontaney, who arrived in Beijing on February 7, 1688, described the contemporary city of Beijing:

Beijing is composed of two cities: the first is the Manchu city, at the center of which is the palace of the emperor; the second is the Han city. The two cities are joined together, and the perimeter of each stretches four French miles. The city is densely populated, crowded, and restless; as a result, although the streets are extraordinarily broad, walking is still inconvenient. Women are not seen on the streets.

We visited the famous Bell Tower of Beijing: someone said to us that this bell positively weighs several hundred thousand kilograms. The bell was shaped like a cylinder, and its diameter was 10 French feet in length. According to the usual proportions in China, the bell's height was half again its width. It was suspended over a foundation of bricks and worked stone. After the wooden roof burnt down, it was covered only by straw thatch.

We also visited the observatory and all its bronze instruments: these

bronze instruments are rather beautiful and have the imperial style. However, I do not know whether these instruments may be used to accurately observe astronomical phenomena. Since they are all nailed to the observation tables, when seen with the naked eye, they do not seem to be evenly distributed, and their lines of observation are arranged poorly in many places.

The gates of the city are larger and more imposing than our city gates: they are all extremely tall, and within there is a large square courtyard, with walls on all four sides. Atop the city walls, whether you face inward to the city or outward from the city, pretty reception rooms have been constructed. The Beijing city walls are built of brick and are approximately 40 feet in height; every 20 fathoms there are fortifications to guard the city, with little square towers at regular intervals. These little square towers are exceptionally well-maintained. To allow those on horseback to ascend the city wall, broad ramps have been constructed at some places. From our residence, we often surveyed the bearings of Beijing, and discovered that its position is 39 degrees, 52 minutes, 55 seconds.

Fontaney stayed a short time in Beijing before being sent to Shanxi to conduct missionary work. He gave a brief description of the circumstances en route.

Most likely because the missionaries had already given a fairly thorough introduction to the city of Beijing in their letters, reports, and memoirs and felt no need to repeat the content, after this point we see little substantial space dedicated to descriptions of the appearance of the Beijing streets and districts in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*. Gerbillon's letter of 1705, however, referred to their surveys and mapping of Beijing: this was evidently part of the surveying and mapping of the entire nation that the Kangxi emperor commanded the missionaries to carry out. There are no records of this matter in Chinese-language archives, and related research works make no reference to it.

At first we did not use the naked eye but rather the strictest geometrical laws to draft a map of the imperial capital (including the city walls). On the map, one can also see the temporary abode of the emperor while on a tour of the tombs of late emperors. The tour residence occupies an extremely large area: its perimeter is 10 French miles, and it is utterly different from European palaces. Here there are no marble statues,

fountains, or stone walls; four crystal-clear brooks planted with trees along the banks irrigate the tour residence. One can see three extremely neat and exquisite buildings. There are also many pools and pastures for deer, roe deer, wild mules, and other brown-furred beasts; livestock sheds for raising domestic animals; fallow fields, meadows, orchards, and even several plots of cultivated land sown with seed; in short, everything that is refined in bucolic life is here in abundance.

The French Jesuits Who Entered the Imperial Court

On February 7, 1688, after Gerbillon's party of five arrived in Beijing, Bouvet and Gerbillon were retained and employed in the capital. Pfister recorded the life of the pair in Beijing: "This pair of priests soon became acquainted with the Manchu script and gained the trust of the emperor: the pair explained the entirety of geometry to the emperor and compiled various mathematical texts using the Manchu script. The emperor commanded that these be translated into Han script and personally wrote a preface to crown the volume. The pair also constructed a chemistry laboratory in the palace: all the necessary instruments were provided, and they set about compiling a complete work on anatomy. Later, at the urging of Père Parrenin, this in turn was translated into Manchu script." Gerbillon and Thomas Pereira once participated in negotiations for the Sino-Russian Treaty of Nerchinsk (1698), serving as interpreters for the Chinese side: Gerbillon left detailed records of this in his diary. The missionaries who entered court often enjoyed many benefits or conveniences, one of which was the study of languages—they could employ the best teachers.

Gerbillon and Bouvet were the first of the French Jesuits to enter the imperial court. In a long letter to Père Lachaise dated February 15, 1703, Fontaney described in detail the process of the Kangxi emperor's studies with Gerbillon and Bouvet. After the Kangxi emperor fell ill and passed away, Parrenin, who had long served at his side as an interpreter, praised him highly in a letter dated May 1, 1723, that he sent to the various gentlemen of the Academy of Sciences:

The Chinese emperor, who is also extremely well-known in Europe, ardently loved the sciences and longed to acquire foreign knowledge.

As he did not believe it necessary to study our language to utilize this knowledge, he believed that the most convenient method for him was to have us exhaustively translate every sort of [French] discovery into his native tongue, as in our previous conversations, I had only given him brief introductions.

This sovereign, who passed away on December 20, 1722, was one of the extraordinary people that one sees only once every few centuries: he placed no limitations on the scope of his knowledge; among all the monarchs of Asia, none have been so fond of science and the arts as he. Introducing new discoveries to him, especially those originating from Europe, was like to flattering and fawning on him; and only at your outstanding Academy of Sciences could so many of these new discoveries have been attained. Therefore, what we Jesuit missionaries discussed most with this mighty monarch was precisely your Academy of Sciences.

A second letter that Parrenin sent to the Academy of Sciences in 1723 discussed how he and other Jesuits had waited on the Kangxi emperor in an imperial progress through border regions; among the Kangxi emperor's retinue of Westerners, there were several Western surgeons, reflecting the Kangxi emperor's faith in Western medicine.

Among the missionaries who came and went at court in the first half of the eighteenth century, Parrenin spent the most time and had the most prominent position in the imperial court. He arrived in China on November 4, 1698, and traveled immediately to Beijing; he passed away in the capital on September 29, 1741. The Kangxi emperor greatly esteemed him and personally selected teachers to instruct him in the Manchu and Mandarin languages, in which Parrenin quickly became proficient; no other European could match his skill. Parrenin served as a translator for forty years; the emperor and those to whom he spoke all expressed satisfaction with him. "The languages that Parrenin has mastered include Manchu, Mandarin, Latin, French, Italian, and Portuguese; all are startled by his abilities." In Sino-Russian exchanges and negotiations, Parrenin played an extremely important role as mediator. In a letter to Père Wesel dated October 10, 1741, Père Valentin Chaliier enthusiastically praised Parrenin's moral character and abilities and reported on the scene at the funeral: the ceremony at its height may

have compared with the theretofore grandest funeral for Ferdinand Verbiest (b. 1623), who passed away in 1688.

During the Qianlong reign, many of those who came and went at court were Jesuits with artisanal skills, including the authors Jean Denis Attiret and Benoist Michael (1715–1774). On October 17, 1754, Jean Amiot sent a letter to Louis Francois Delatour (1727–1807) discussing Attiret’s situation waiting on the Qianlong emperor at court: Attiret had been summoned by the emperor to Rehe province, and after the Qianlong emperor had suppressed the Zungar rebellions, he drafted a “Map of Conquered Lands” for the emperor. The emperor wished to confer an official title on Attiret, but Attiret declined; in court, he described the situation in France to the ministers. In the Qing palace, Attiret and other missionaries painted pictures and constructed a chiming clock to announce the watches, fountaining water columns, glass household utensils, a walking clockwork lion, and other items. A letter from the Jesuit Louis du Gad (1707–1786) to Père Carrasso, dated December 13, 1757, mentioned how Pierre d’Incarville (1706–1757), who had just passed away, had expanded the imperial garden and how Benoist Michael had constructed a European-style palace.

In a letter dated October 15, 1780, Jacques Ollières mentioned the three primary trades in demand at court: painter, watchmaker, and machinist. Other skills included translation and astronomy.

Beijing Missionary Work in *Lettres*

Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères compiles a large amount of material related to the Jesuits’ missionary work, which can be summarized as follows.

The Construction of Churches

The first church to be built in Beijing was the South Cathedral, established by Matteo Ricci (1552–1610); the second was the East Cathedral, established by Gabriel de Magalhães (1609–1677) and Ricci. These two churches were part of the Portuguese mission. The third church was the North Cathedral, the construction

of which was directed by Gerbillon; this marked the inauguration of the French mission. Père Pierre Jartoux (1668–1720) described the construction of the North Cathedral in detail in a letter sent from Beijing:

We will begin by speaking of the grand opening of the church: this finally came to pass on December 9, 1703. As you know, in January 1699, the emperor gave Père Gerbillon permission to build a church in the section of open land the emperor gifted to us in the Imperial City. Shortly thereafter, this monarch again dispatched people to ask all the missionaries in the palace if they were willing to make contributions to the construction of a church, treating it as a sort of philanthropic project—he himself was also willing to expend some effort on this. Soon after, he distributed 50 gold écus to every person, indicating that this sum should be spent on [the construction]. He also provided some of the materials and appointed officials to supervise the construction. While making excavations for the foundation, we had only 2,800 livres: we looked to the emperor to supply the remaining expenses. This boundlessly benevolent emperor did not disappoint us. The construction and decoration of the church took a full four years, and it is one of the Orient's most beautiful and standard churches.

After the church was constructed, it met with censure from officials for being excessively tall; they dropped their charges at the word of the Kangxi emperor.

In a 1703 report by François Noël to the superior general of the Jesuits' General Curia in Rome, he discussed the fact that the Portuguese Jesuits had constructed a small church in Beijing specifically for the use of women:

They have constructed a women's church in the imperial capital of Beijing. In that place, such a church is extremely necessary, and it has long been eagerly awaited, because the situation in China is different from that in Europe: Europe's churches are shared by men and women alike, but the rites and customs of China do not allow men and women to mingle in the same place, as people believe that the mingling of the sexes is improper.

Beijing's women enrich the church with their most valuable possessions. They express special zeal in adorning the altar: some donate their pearls, diamonds, and other jewels, just as women once did during the days of the old laws.

Number of Followers

The results of the Jesuits' efforts primarily manifested in their missionary work: in their letters, they therefore recorded in detail their own progress in this regard, claiming credit for their achievements from Rome or the French king: "In 1694, the Jesuits baptized 530 people in Beijing; in 1695, we baptized 614 people; in 1696, we baptized 633 people; similar numbers were recorded for the following year. These numbers reflect only the baptism of adults. We baptized many more children, particularly those children who are abandoned on street corners every morning."

In letters sent to the superiors of the missions in China and India, Père Francois Xavier d'Entrecolles referred to the missionary work in Beijing, the details of which he heard from Cyr Contancin: "In a letter I received in February of this year, he told me that, in the space of a few months, 1,100 people came to our church to be baptized; since the year 1700, 50,000 people have been baptized at the three churches in Beijing. During that time, this priest also inspected our northern mission in the region of the Great Wall, where seventy people had been baptized."

The number of people baptized at the French mission or in the French church was less than in the Portuguese missions. D'Entrecolles discussed this point in a letter to Père Jean Baptiste du Halde of the Jesuits: "Every year, we report to you that we have baptized many foundlings or dead infants. Our church has baptized over 600, and the two Portuguese churches have baptized even more, because their missions are larger than ours."

In terms of missionary work, an important element of the Jesuits' efforts was their adoption of abandoned children, who were the primary source for training believers. In general, the adoption of foundlings to train believers was a more reliable method than converting adults to a belief in God through preaching. At the time, due to family economic problems, the birth of illegitimate children, discrimination against daughters, the birth of disabled children or other reasons, the phenomenon of abandoned children was extremely serious: this provided a useful opportunity for the Jesuits, whose letters make mention of this fact:

A vast number of children are abandoned in Beijing every year; it is simply unbelievable. Nearly every day we must baptize some of these children; this is one of the most reliable achievements that we may attain in this country.

In Beijing, many children are abandoned; the majority of them die due to a lack of necessary succor. . . . The Jesuits of the three large churches in Beijing have long apportioned among ourselves the various places where abandoned children are left.

Missionary Incidents

In letters 56–62 in the second volume of *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*, Dominique Parrenin wrote seven successive letters reporting on the experiences of the Sunu clan of imperial relatives, who were castigated and banished for converting to Christianity. According to the records in Parrenin's letters, the Sunu clan of imperial relatives was an aristocratic Manchu family in Beijing. "He was a blood relative of the emperor, but he had an excellent faith in Christianity. I did not participate in baptizing and guiding this clan of imperial relatives to enter the faith—the success for this should be attributed to the emperor and the Portuguese Jesuit Joseph Suarez; however, my contact with them has been quite intimate, therefore I can give you an accurate and authentic report of their story."

The Qing Court's Policy Toward Missionaries

In comparing the reigns of the Kangxi emperor, the Yongzheng emperor, and the Qianlong emperor, Kangxi's attitude and policies toward Christianity were fairly tolerant. After Yongzheng assumed the throne, he changed the Kangxi era's lenient policies on Christianity; the case of the Sunu imperial relatives happened not long after he took the throne. A letter sent by Parrenin to Jean Baptiste du Halde dated October 22, 1736, discussed "the changes in attitude toward Christianity since Qianlong assumed the throne." Parrenin believed that Qianlong "beyond all doubt hates Christianity." In a 1746 report on the story of a missionary incident in Fujian province, Jean Gaspard Chanseau (1711–1756) also mentioned

that the Qianlong emperor's prohibition against Christianity had become more severe and described the atmosphere of hatred for Christianity in Beijing.

Scientific and Technological Exchanges in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*

Chinese scholars have produced many studies of Jesuits and Sino-Western scientific and technological exchanges and their relationship to the Chinese sciences. The first three chapters of Benjamin A. Elman's *A Cultural History of Modern Science in China* also offer an excellent discussion of this matter.⁵ Chinese and Western scholars alike have observed and confirmed the key role that the Jesuits played in Sino-Western scientific and technological exchanges during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

In *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*, Parrenin's letters provide rich material on contemporary Sino-French scientific, technological, and cultural exchanges: the scientific and technological issues he discussed in his correspondence with President of the Academy of Sciences de Mairan are extremely valuable.

A letter from Parrenin to de Mairan dated August 11, 1730, referred to his observations of the state of the sciences in China. He believed that two primary causes hindered Chinese development of the sciences: "The first cause is that those people who may be able to achieve something in this regard cannot expect to receive any recompense. . . . The second major cause preventing the development of science is that, externally or internally, there is no system to stimulate and maintain competition." He believed: "regardless of the early and rudimentary knowledge the Chinese have gained of astronomy or geometry, we can affirm that the Chinese have not promoted the development of this branch of knowledge in the slightest; today their knowledge in these fields is not very advanced. What is truly unfortunate is that Chinese people rarely worry about this: they cultivate only pure mental analysis and are not much interested in science. The Chinese people are fonder of astrology."

Parrenin died the next year, in 1741. Antoine Gaubil (1689–1759) also made outstanding contributions to Sino-Western scientific and technological exchanges. Gaubil arrived in Guangzhou on June 27, 1722, and reached Beijing by April 9 of the following year. During the time he spent in Beijing, due to the Yongzheng emperor's ban on Christianity, Gaubil could only act as an interpreter. From *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*, we can see that in 1719 Gaubil wrote a treatise on the Ryukyu Archipelago. On July 2, 1759, he died of illness in Beijing, and on September 4 of the same year, Jean Amiot gave an account of Gaubil's achievements in his work while reporting his death to Jean-Paul Grandjean de Fouchy (1707–1788) of the Academy of Sciences: these included a completed *History of Chinese Astronomy*; a translated *Book of Changes*; *Genghis Khan*, based on Chinese works; *Annals of China*; and others. Gaubil was an emissary bringing Chinese culture, science, and technology to Europe.

Amiot was the third French Jesuit who made outstanding contributions to Sino-Western scientific and cultural exchanges. He arrived in Beijing in 1751 and remained there until his death in 1793. Between 1776 and 1789, his friends in France collected his *A Record of Chinese History, Science, Art, Customs, Morals, and Habits*, fifteen volumes in all, and published it in Paris. In 1815, the French *Revue encyclopédique* gave a high appraisal of the work.

Records of Earthquakes and Calamities in Beijing

On June 11, 1720, an intense earthquake shook Beijing: its epicenter was Sha city in Huailai county (today's Huailai county town in Hebei province), approximately 100 kilometers northwest of Beijing, with a magnitude of 6.75 and an intensity of 9. Records of this event appear in the Chinese documents *The Authentic Records of August Emperor Ren of the Qing Dynasty* (清圣祖仁皇帝实录 Qing shengzu Ren huangdi shilu), volume 288; the Qianlong-era Yanqing County Gazette (延庆县志 Yanqing xianzhi), volume 1, Kangxi era Huairou County Gazette (怀柔县志 Huairou xianzhi), volume 2; and the Guangxu-era Miyun County Gazette (密云县志 Miyun xianzhi), volume 2.

In a letter sent from Beijing and dated October 19 of the same year, François d'Entrecolles gave a detailed report on the circumstances of the earthquake, which is much more complete and accurate than other related records we have seen in Chinese documents and thus has considerable historical value. This historical text was also excerpted in *Historical Materials on Earthquakes in the Beijing Area* (北京地区地震史料 Beijing diqu dizhen shiliao), demonstrating its worth.

In 1730, another major earthquake struck Beijing, with a magnitude of approximately 6.5. Although this earthquake does not directly appear in the records in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*, indirect evidence reveals that contemporary Jesuits were aware of this incident. Claude-François Loppin (1707–1742) narrated this rather incredible story:

You may remember that approximately ten years ago a frightful great earthquake struck the capital city. Around the end of last year, a Chinese person surprisingly vowed that soon a similar great earthquake would strike and spread the news everywhere; he even calculated the month and day when this disaster would strike. Nothing more needed to be done to spread alarm around Beijing. On the appointed day, extraordinary numbers of people fled outside the city walls. Many people were parted forever. The emperor was virtually the only one who demonstrated calm: he did not in the least wish to leave the palace. The day when fate would be determined arrived, and the panic redoubled. But the day passed without any signs of an earthquake. Both furious and fearful, the people wished to tear the false prophet to pieces. The emperor, however, was content to banish him, and gave him a severe warning that he would be immediately executed if he should ever again incite such panic.

A Jesuit narrating the story of a Beijing county graduate (*xiucai*) and Christian believer, named Jean-Baptiste Lu, did not let slip the opportunity to use this earthquake to proselytize for Christianity:

Perhaps it is his robust virtue that guided God to grant him special protection when the famous earthquake struck Beijing in 1730. In the space of one minute, this earthquake crushed about 100,000 people. In the most violent moment of this fearsome disaster, the house in which he and his wife resided caved in, burying them completely in the ruins. They could not flee and could not even call for help. On the next day,

people excavated a channel through the ruins to pull them out. People believed them to have been crushed to death and were already making plans to hold a funeral, but were surprised to discover that the two were still alive and well. They were safe and sound, without any injuries. This incident was widely known wherever he went and among all the Christians of Beijing, and he attributed it to the grace of God.

As a national capital, the living conditions in Beijing were comparatively superior: therefore, during catastrophes, it often became the place of refuge to which the victims in the surrounding areas fled to escape the disaster; this was also recorded in *Lettres édifiantes*.

Conclusion

In 1773, the newly appointed pope in Rome announced the suppression of the Society of Jesus. When the news reached Beijing, there were still seventeen Jesuits in the city. Thereafter the number of people gradually decreased, and by the end of the eighteenth century, few were left. The main force in Sino-Western cultural exchanges in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, the Jesuits finally approached their historical denouement.

First, the French Jesuits' "Beijing experience" was an important element in Western missionaries' Sinology: it constituted the principal source for eighteenth-century Western knowledge of Beijing. Representative Sinological works produced by the French Jesuits in Beijing include monumental tomes such as Louis le Comte's *Un jésuite à Pékin: nouveaux mémoires sur l'état présent de la Chine, 1687–1692* (A Jesuit in Beijing: New Memoirs on the Present State of China, 1687–1692); *Description de l'empire de la Chine* and *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*, edited by du Halde; and *Mémoires concernant les Chinois* (full title *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les mœurs, les usages, etc., des chinois, par les missionnaires de Peking*) edited by Brotier, Guignes, and Sacy.⁶ These not only broadened the perspective of Western knowledge on China but also expanded the scope of Sinological research fields: these were the canonical works of eighteenth-century Western missionaries' Sinology. French schol-

ars once gave the following appraisal of the value of these works: “In their distant American or Chinese sojourns during the Age of Enlightenment, the Jesuits once played an extremely important role in terms of the development of thought and spiritual outlook. Their letters, which today lie buried in libraries, were once very successful in bookstores. They not only captivated Voltaire and Montesquieu but also universally fascinated the ‘intelligentsia’ of Europe, such as scholars and philosophers.”

Second, as intermediaries in Sino-Western cultural exchanges and the emissaries of Western culture, the French Jesuits facilitated bidirectional exchanges during their “Beijing experience.” On the one hand, their experiences brought information about Chinese science, technology, and culture to the West; on the other hand, they brought Western science, technology, art, and music to China. This played an important role in promoting Sino-Western cultural exchanges.

Third, the French Jesuits transmitted information on China, which served as fuel for eighteenth-century European “chinoiserie.”

Fourth, as the primary source of materials for French and even European imaginings of China, the “Beijing experience” had an important impact on the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment, and even the entirety of the modern European cultural imagination and revolution of thought, which cannot be overlooked. The key terminology for the appraisal of Chinese history and politics within the “image of China” constructed by the French Enlightenment Movement is also intimately linked to the information disseminated by the Jesuits and its impact.

Notes

1. Jean-Baptiste du Halde, *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise, enrichie des cartes générales et particulières de ces pays, de la carte générale et des cartes particulières du Thibet, et de la Corée; et ornée d'un grand nombre de figures et de vignettes gravées en taille-douce*, 4 vols. (Paris: P.G. Le Mercier, 1735); du Halde, *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères: mémoires de la Chine* (Paris: Chez Nicolas Le Clerc, 1738); Gabriel Brotier et al., eds., *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les mœurs, les usages, etc., des chinois, par les missionnaires de Peking* (Paris: Nyon, 1776–89).

2. Louis Pfister, *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur les Jésuites de l'ancienne mission de Chine, 1552–1773* (Shanghai: Imprimerie de la Mission catholique, 1932–34).

3. *Répertoire des Jésuites de Chine de 1552 à 1800* (Rome: Institutum Historicum S.I., 1973); S.J. Joseph Dehergne, “Appeal for the Publication of an Authentic Edition of the Correspondence on China in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*,” in *Collected Papers of the Twenty-Ninth Congress of Orientalists* (1977), 97–102; Dehergne, “A Discussion of *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l’empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise*,” *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 72 (1983): 267–98.

4. Virgile Pinot, *La Chine et la formation de l’esprit philosophique en France (1640–1740)*, vol. 2: *Documents inédits relatifs à la connaissance de la Chine en France* (Paris: 1932).

5. Benjamin A. Elman, *A Cultural History of Modern Science in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

6. Louis le Comte, *Un jésuite à Pékin: nouveaux mémoires sur l’état présent de la Chine, 1687–1692* (Paris: Phœbus, 1990).

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