

Recent debates about Ricci's legacy

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The image of Ricci in China has known a remarkable shift. Thirty years ago, he was often depicted as the vanguard of Western colonialism. At the occasion of the four hundredth year of his birth, his image has become positive, being even considered as the representative of the golden age of Sino-western relations. Ricci is mentioned in the history textbooks of high school, which highlight his scientific and cultural contribution to China – though the religious dimension of his work is often overlooked. This shift in the general perception about Ricci is due to the political changes in the last thirty years, especially China's will of inserting itself into the world. This shift is also due to an abundant academic research, which has evaluated afresh Ricci's legacy in the domains of science, culture, literature, philosophy, arts and religion. Most of the researchers have shown a relative independence, being free from the state ideology of the past, and have explored new venues. I shall present and analyze here some recent debates concerning the contribution of Ricci from the point of view of the intellectual history of China. How the knowledge brought by Ricci does insert itself or not within the tradition? Can this knowledge be ultimately assimilated by this tradition? I shall expose and analyze the contradicting answers of two scholars and I shall attempt in the conclusion to express my own stance on the issue.

Ge Zhaoguang: Ricci, or the impossible fusion between Chinese tradition and Western modernity

Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光, born in 1954 in Shanghai, has known during his youth the Cultural Revolution. It is only at the age of 24 that he started higher education, being part of the first batch entering university in 1978. He is now director of the Institute of Literature and History at the Fudan University, in Shanghai. In 2007 he has published an important work in two volumes, *History of Chinese Thought* 中国思想史.¹ His research encompasses a vast field which he calls thought, including conceptual or philosophical thought as such (*sixiang* 思想), knowledge (*zhishi* 知识) and beliefs (*xinyang* 信仰). He deals therefore with a complex reality which could be called as well culture. His approach is original in the sense that he departs from a purely Marxist approach, by which the social and economical structures are leading history, and from a purely Hegelian approach, by which ideas are the motor of history.

While the first volume of *History of Chinese Thought* tells the slow construction of Chinese thought, the second volume describes its decomposition under challenges coming from the outside. If the first challenge brought by the introduction of Buddhism was successfully addressed during the Song dynasty, the challenge brought

¹ Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光, *History of Chinese Thought*, *Zhongguo sixiangshi* 中国思想史 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2007).

by the West has never been overcome and has finally led to the decomposition (*wajie* 瓦解) of tradition.² The disintegration reached a point of non-return with the military defeat of China against Japan in 1895. This defeat made Chinese aware that they were forced, for their own survival, to enter into a globalized world, and that they needed to discard their own tradition, replacing it by Western culture. The military defeat marked a decisive and irreversible step in a lengthy process of disintegration of Chinese tradition, a process which started with Ricci. By introducing the Western knowledge, this one created a convulsion (*zhenhan* 震撼) which has progressively shaken all the edifice of thought-knowledge-beliefs.

It is therefore within the framework of this dramatic history of the nation that Ge Zhaoguang deals with the first encounter with the West, through the personage of Ricci. For him, the encounter has unfolded into the three realms of thought, knowledge and beliefs. However, in the realm of thought, the consequences were marginal, because, as Ge Zhaoguang argues, the Chinese could easily accept Western concepts thanks to a process of “double translation” (*shuangchong fanyi* 双重翻译), at the level of the language and the level of historical consciousness. Most of the concepts introduced by Ricci in his *True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, or *Tianzhu shiyi* 天主实义, were translated and explained through Confucian terminology and this led the Chinese back to the familiar universe of their own tradition. In this process, the translation of ideas from a language into another language would have diluted and dissolved the gap in meaning, creating for the Ming and Qing dynasty reader the wrong feeling of being in presence of something similar. Unlike the theoretical level of ideas upon which an apparent accord could be found, on the contrary, the encounter at the level of knowledge and beliefs created an immense shock, by which the traditional knowledge and beliefs were directly knocked down.

As a way of illustration, Ge Zhaoguang takes the interpretations about heaven, or *tian* 天, which he analyzes according to the three levels of thought, knowledge and beliefs. At the level of thought, Ricci and the other missionaries attempted to Christianize the Chinese concept of heaven, and indeed, their use of Chinese language and Confucian concepts tended to reduce the differences between the Christian and Confucian meanings of heaven. Ricci could hold the concept of heaven as a God-person, attempting to show that such a conception could be found in the ancient texts. This way, the conflict was never direct or manifest. Moreover, even though some Chinese intellectuals attached a certain importance to the conceptual differences between the Christian god and the Confucian heaven, most people were not interested into those debates which did not change fundamentally their view of the world. In brief, for them, the *Tianzhu shiyi* of Ricci did not matter much.

On the contrary, when Ricci presented knowledge and beliefs concerning heaven, the conflict with tradition became unavoidable. Western astronomy provoked a deep crisis in Chinese science, which was challenged by more accurate methods of calculus. It was also a crisis at the level of political beliefs, since the imperial court had traditionally exerted the monopoly of the discourse on the celestial court of stars, discourse which was now challenged by a foreigner. But even more, European astronomy destroyed knowledge and beliefs deeply rooted in the life and action of Chinese people. While the Chinese traditionally believed that “heaven is round and earth is square” (*tianyuan difang* 天圆地方), Ricci explained, in the legend to his *Complete Map of all the Countries of the Earth* (*Kunyu wanguo quantu* 坤与万国全

² Ge Zhaoguang, 328-329.

图), drawn in 1584 at Zhaoqing 肇庆, that the universe was made of concentric spheres, that the earth was at the middle, making one single sphere with the ocean.

The *Complete Map of all the Countries of the Earth* was also proposing a new disposition of China among the other countries. While the Chinese believed that China was surrounded by four oceans, Ricci showed them that there were in fact only two seas next to China, i.e., the sea of the East and the sea of the South-East. Also, while China was supposed to occupy the two-thirds of the world, it was only occupying a fifth of Asia, which itself was one continent among five. Ge Zhaoguang shows the quickness with which Ricci's map was diffused in China. This entry of the country in the concert of nations, at least at the level of mental representations, was causing a difficult repositioning: China not anymore center of the world but one nation among many, in a multi-cultural world.

Before Ge Zhaoguang, many commentators had noticed that Ricci put China in the middle of the map in order to give satisfaction to the Chinese. In fact, Pasquale D'Elia, Angelo Cattaneo, and more recently Gianni Criveller stressed the fact that this is a legend which does not resist a precise observation of the map, since it is the Pacific Ocean and not China which is at the center of Ricci's map. Therefore, it could only be said that Ricci put China, not at the center, but near the center of the map.³ In fact, the legend that Ricci would have intentionally put China at the center of the map is denied even more radically if we pay attention to another legend — the one that Ricci wrote on the map and where he affirms that the earth is a sphere. Ge Zhaoguang shows, better than many, the enormity of the changes in representations, stating a conclusion already drawn by Yang Tingyun 楊廷筠 at that time: since the earth is a sphere, “there is no point where to start or finish, no center no edge.”⁴ In other word, the issue is not anymore to localize a country as the center of the world, since no country matches with the geographical center of the earth. The novelty of Ricci's map was indeed to indicate a world which had lost any center.

As we can read in his “journal,” Ricci was much aware of the novelty of his affirmations. However, Ge Zhaoguang underlines that he could not imagine the chain consequences, or domino effects as he wrote, progressively knocking down the whole system. With a tradition associating earth, heaven and man into one triad, Ge Zhaoguang comes to ask: “How Chinese could remain the same if heaven and earth were not as before?”⁵ Not only the harmony of the world was broken, but also the Chinese had lost reference on earth and on heaven.

For Ge Zhaoguang, the encounter between the West and China is a phenomenon of action and reaction, and on this point, he is influenced by Jacques Gernet whom he quotes several times. The reaction is described as such: a movement of acceptance of the Western knowledge, but which often limits itself to adopt instruments (*qi* 器), et and finally rejects the Western values in order to better affirm the legitimacy of the Chinese *dao* 道. However, while Gernet placed the conflict at the level of different conceptual and linguistic structures, Ge Zhaoguang places it at the level of knowledge and beliefs. Moreover, he attempts to go beyond the binary logic of action and reaction, showing complex processes by which the Chinese accepted the new knowledge and integrated it a new vision of the world.⁶ However, he considers that these attempts had little success.

³ Gianni Criveller, “Matteo Ricci maps did not put China at centre of the world,” Asia News (10 January 2010).

⁴ Yang Tingyun, quoted by Ge Zhaoguang, 371

⁵ Ge Zhaoguang, 345.

⁶ Jacques Gernet himself took some distance with the scheme of action-reaction, since the subtitle *Action et Réaction* had disappeared from the second French edition of *Chine et Christianisme* in 1991.

For example, some intellectuals at that time could find in the Chinese tradition some representations of the earth similar to the one from the West, like by Zou Yan (邹衍, c. 305-240 Av. JC). This allowed them presenting the Western knowledge as indigenous and traditional, even claiming that this representation of the world had initially been communicated to the West by the ancient Chinese, before it was lost in China. However, Ge Zhaoguang insists that this recourse to tradition is very artificial and does not succeed in hiding the novelty of the Western discourse, since the theory of Zou Yan was not lost or forgotten, but constantly and on purpose rejected by the official discourse which affirmed that all the people surrounded by the four seas were paying tribute to China, at the center of the world. This official position was restated by the *History of the Ming*, or *Mingshi* 明史, holding that the Western representation of a world made of five continents is absurd and without proof.

Ge Zhaoguang mentions another attempt in saving the tradition. Discussing Ricci's world map, many intellectuals quoted the sentence of the Neo-Confucian thinker Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (or Lu Xiangshan 陆象山, 1139-1193): "The people of the sea of the East and those of the sea of the West have the same and unique spirit and reason."⁷ On the basis of this universalism, all men are equal, without political or cultural hierarchy between them. This way, Ricci's world map would only confirm an opinion present in Chinese tradition. However, this idea of Lu Jiuyuan was very far from representing the mainstream of a tradition which had remained firmly Sino-centric.

For Ge Zhaoguang in brief, Western astronomy and cartography have provoked "the ruin of heaven and the cleaving of earth" (*tianbengdilie* 天崩地裂). Matteo Ricci represents the coming of a system entirely heterogeneous to the Chinese tradition, not essentially at the level of philosophical thought, but at the one of knowledge and beliefs. Even though Ricci expressed himself through Confucian language and terminology, and despite the fact that Chinese intellectuals attempted to integrate the Western vision into the Chinese tradition, all these efforts did not allow ultimately the tradition to function adequately in the new worldwide episteme.

It seems to me that Ge Zhaoguang's thesis is flawed because it contains three simplifications. First, he presents tradition as something monolithic and fixed. It is all or nothing. If one element is denied, the whole collapses, as in his image of the domino game. Also, his anti-intellectualism makes him overlook the efforts of reason in having different cultures communicate. This leads him to overemphasize what he calls the knowledge and beliefs. I am not sure that the new representation of the world and of the cosmos brought Ricci changed so radically the representations of heaven, earth and man, because these representations were continuing to work at the local level. Third, his reading of the cultural history is unilateral because it stresses only ruptures, without seeing how the tradition maintains and transforms itself. The rupture brought by Ricci takes disproportionate dimension because it is understood against the background of the rupture with tradition in the twentieth century, when a new episteme was set up, with new conceptual categories, new arrangement of academic disciplines, and new institutions, all following the Western pattern. However, the rupture is not as radical as believed if we consider two modes of resistance, one manifest and one hidden. In one hand, some Chinese thinkers in the twentieth century presented themselves as defending tradition and have proposed different formula in order to preserve the essence of Chinese culture, and yet integrating certain aspects from the West. We can think here about Contemporary Confucianism whose efforts

⁷ Lu Jiuyuan, quoted by Ge Zhaoguang, 378.

were similar to those of intellectuals under the Ming and Qing dynasties. Even though these efforts were not enough to resolve the feeling of crisis in the tradition, it seems to me that their results cannot be considered as superficial and without significance, as Ge Zhaoguang does. But, it exist another form of resistance, more subtle and hidden. While the new episteme seems to discard completely the traditional forms, in fact, this does not mean the abandonment of the tradition, but its continuation under new forms. Behind the terminologies borrowed from the West, the traditional ways remain well alive. Therefore, it matters to pay a greater attention to the strategies, more or less conscious, by which the new episteme is shaped by tradition.⁸ The rupture with tradition, felt so strongly by Ge Zhaoguang and by many other intellectuals today, is more grounded in a feeling of the tragic than in a rigorous analysis. However, not all intellectuals today fall into this trap and some are able to see how, starting from Ricci, there is the constitution of a new episteme, without leading to a frontal opposition or clash with the tradition.

Zhang Xiaolin: Ricci, or the beginnings of a fourth current

Zhang Xiaolin 张晓林 was born in 1956, only two years after Ge Zhaoguang. He shares with him similar experiences like Cultural Revolution and the re-opening of universities in 1978. He teaches in the department of philosophy of Normal University of East China, in Shanghai. While Ge Zhaoguang chooses Ricci's world map as the decisive element challenging traditional cosmology, Zhang Xiaolin emphasizes the importance of the philosophical and theological ideas contained in the *Tianzhu shiyi*.

In order to appreciate the novelty of Zhang Xiaolin's study, mention has to been made of Sun Shangyang 孙尚扬. Before this one, Riccian studies in China were very much influenced by historical positivism, attempting to exhibit Ricci's mistakes in his understanding of Chinese culture and philosophy, making him criticize in a superficial way the concepts of *li* 理 and *taiji* 太极. Sun was the first in China to analyze with some depth and objectivity the *Tianzhu shiyi*, defending his PhD dissertation in 1991.⁹ Sun was showing that Ricci made a choice within Confucianism, harmonizing (*tiaohe* 调和) the elements compatible with Christianity, especially in the domain of morality, and rejecting the elements not compatible, especially in the domains of anthropology and metaphysics. However, Sun was also showing that the process was not unilateral, since Christianity accommodating (*biantong* 变通) itself to another culture, for example by stressing the original goodness of man, instead of the traditional insistence on the original sin in Christianity.

Some ten years after the ground-breaking study of Sun Shangyang, Zhang Xiaolin's study of the *Tianzhu shiyi* is a landmark, both for its methodology and its conclusion.¹⁰ First, concerning the method, Zhang acknowledges that Ricci's understanding of Neo-Confucianism was quite limited, since he knew only a little part of this immense and complex tradition. However, Zhang is able to go beyond the issue of the "authentic Confucianism," by making recourse to the hermeneutical method of Hans-Georg Gadamer and his notion of "fusion of horizons." This way, the

⁸ Cf. my article: "The Re-shaping of Academic Disciplines in China," in *Chinese Cross-Currents* 5.4 (2008): 122-128.

⁹ Sun Shangyang 孙尚扬, *Mingmo Tianzhu jiao yu Ruxue de jiaolu he chongtu* 明末天主教与儒学的交流和冲突 (Taipei 台北: Wenjin chubanshe 文津出版社, 1992).

¹⁰ Zhang Xiaolin 张晓林, *Tianzhu shiyi yu Zhongguo xuetong* 天主实义与中国学统 (Shanghai 上海: Xuelin chubanshe 学林出版社, 2005).

Tianzhu shiyi would represent hermeneutical choices done by Ricci in his reading of Confucianism. The criterion is not mainly at the level of the objective and permanent truth of Confucianism, but more at the level of the effectiveness of a new discourse producing meaning.

Concerning the results of his study, they tend to prove that the discourse of Ricci has been effective since the *Tianzhu shiyi* inaugurates a new line of thought within the intellectual tradition of China. The novelty of the approach is to measure the reception of Ricci's ideas among Chinese intellectuals. While Ge Zhaoguang and Gernet affirm a fundamental incompatibility between West and China, leading to the historical failure in associating the two, on the contrary, Zhang Xiaolin strives to show the beginnings of a new philosophical and theological line, integrating Western and Chinese thoughts, and becoming an intrinsic current of Chinese thought, starting from the end of the Ming. Distinct from other schools, this current could not be ignored by them, and they even had to position themselves in relation to it. In other words, this line of thought was not marginal since interacting with the other schools. Zhang can further states that any intellectual history which would overlook this would be incomplete and meaningless.

Three chapters of his book deal with the reception of Ricci's ideas during the Ming and Qing dynasties, respectively by the opponents to Christianity, by the Chinese Christian apologists, and by thinkers who are representative of mainstream thought. The first group answered criticisms addressed by Ricci in the *Tianzhu shiyi* against the anthropocentrism of Neo-Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Ricci was stressing in an indirect way the fundamental unity of thought in these three schools: beyond practical differences, the three schools had developed the idea of an innate essence, being present in man and in communion with the cosmos. May it be the original mind, or *benxin* 本心, in Confucianism, the Buddhahood, or *foxing* 佛性, or the *Dao* in Taoism, the three represent an indigenous tradition advocating an "intrinsic union" between man and the absolute, which differs completely from an "extrinsic union," and from the affirmation of a transcendence, as advocated by Christianity.¹¹

However, unlike Ge Zhaoguang (or Gernet), Zhang Xiaolin maintains that the Western and Chinese traditions are not at this point incommensurate that no symbiosis can happen. The very existence of a second group, that is, the Chinese Christian intellectuals, proves the possibility of a convergence between Confucianism and Christianity. Following the steps of the Dutch sinologists Erik Zürcher, Zhang Xiaolin sees in Chinese Christians the creation of a new current of thought, "Confucian monotheism" (*rujia yishenlun* 儒家一神论), which stressed the belief in one supreme God.¹² However, in disagreement with Zürcher, he points out that this current should not be understood as integrated within orthodox Confucianism (*rujia daotong* 儒家道统), because it represents a rupture with orthodoxy. Even though a convert like Yang Tingyun could claim for himself a double identity of Confucian and Christian, his belief in a personal God was in contradiction with Confucianism — what the opponents to Christianity saw very clearly. Therefore, it would be wrong to say that Yang Tingyun incorporated Christianity into Confucianism, since it is the former which provide the matrix of his thought.¹³

This way, Zhang Xiaolin denies the possibility for a Confucian to adopt Christian

¹¹ Zhang Xiaolin, 293-294.

¹² Cf. Erik Zürcher, "A complement to Confucianism: Christianity and orthodoxy in late imperial China," in *Norms and the state in China*, edited by Huang Chun-chieh and Erik Zürcher (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 71-92.

¹³ Zhang Xiaolin, 338.

faith unless his Confucianism is radically transformed and displaced in the margin. He argues that in the case of Buddhism there is a greater flexibility and tolerance and that Buddhism and Confucianism can exist together. On the contrary, Christianity would include a principle of exclusivity which would necessarily reject other systems of thoughts. Moreover, Confucianism grants to religious thought a great margin in the measure that it does not modify substantially the Confucian system. Precisely, Ricci started a work of interpretation, introducing Christian dogmas like creation, which substantially modify Confucianism. Thus, Zhang Xiaolin shows that “Confucian monotheism” represents an intellectual current which is distinct from orthodox Confucianism. Historically, “Christian monotheism” is not a Christianized branch of Confucianism, but represents a fourth current, or school, next to Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism.

The positions of the first two groups, i.e., the Chinese Christians and their opponents, are important since they allow grasping the issues in debate. However, we are dealing here with very tiny groups. And so, the reception of Ricci’s ideas should be mostly measured among intellectuals representing mainstream thought. Zhang analyzes in details three thinkers of Late Ming and Qing, as representative of three different attitudes: the contempt (*qingshi* 轻视) of Fang Yizhi 方以智 (1611-1671), the indifference (*moshi* 漠视) of Huang Zongxi 黄宗羲 (1610-1695) and the reserve (*huiyan* 讳言) of Dai Zhen 戴振 (1724-1777). The first one, Fang Yizhi, very young, was exposed to the Western knowledge, but he made a clear selection. He adopted natural science from the missionaries but he rejected firmly the metaphysical and cosmological theories which supported them, such as the idea of creation. Instead, he maintained the superiority of Confucian cosmology.

Concerning Huang Zongxi, Zhang Xiaolin admits that this one stucked to Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, especially to the monism of the original *qi* (*yuanqi* 元气).¹⁴ However, Huang Zongxi was influenced by certain ideas of Ricci, especially about the worship of the ancient Chinese to *Shangdi*. He admitted that this worship had existed and that the ancient Chinese had the idea of personal God. It was therefore a major contribution of Ricci to underline the theistic element in ancient thought, even if Ricci had overemphasized this element more for missionary purpose than for historical objectivity. Moreover, the highlighting of this ancient theism would have been the occasion for Huang Zongxi to hold himself a theistic faith. Therefore, the positive reception of Ricci’s ideas in Huang Zongxi could be proven.¹⁵

Concerning the third thinker, Dai Zhen, Ricci’s influence over him had already been suggested by Deng Shi 邓实 in 1905. Since 2000, new proofs have been given by Xu Sumin 许苏民. Dai Zhen’s illustrates a major difficulty in assessing correctly the reception of Ricci’s ideas because of the proscription of Christianity at that time. While the books of Ricci and other missionaries could circulate freely, the works written by Chinese which refer to Western knowledge, like those by Xu Guangqi 徐光启 or Fang Yizhi, were forbidden. Under such circumstances, it is probable that Dai Zhen was cautious and avoided direct references to Western knowledge.

Zhang Xiaolin places Dai Zhen within a current of reform of thought, which, since the beginning of the Ming, was criticizing the mainstream and official thought, the school of the principle, or *lixue* 理学. Ricci himself had chosen to join this

¹⁴ Zhang Xiaolin, 305.

¹⁵ The proofs of Huang Zongxi’s monotheism seem quite light, since he is presented also as a pantheist. Zhang Xiaolin does not show how Huang Zongxi could articulate pantheism (belief in *yuanqi*) and theism (belief in *Shangdi*).

current of reform, to which he brought new elements. In the case of Dai Zhen, Zhang Xiaolin shows that the exegetical method of Dai Zhen was influenced by Ricci. Dai Zhen made recourse to philology to recover the philosophical meaning of the Classics, meaning which would have been distorted by the Neo-Confucian exegesis. For example, Dai Zhen followed Ricci in affirming that the Neo-Confucian of *li* 理 was not central in the ancient classics. Also, the several occurrences of *li* in the ancient texts have the meaning of arrangement, disposition, and not the meaning of original essence abiding in the human mind, as the Neo-Confucians pretended. After a detailed comparison of the exegetical methods used by Ricci in the *Tianzhu shiyi* and by Dai Zhen in the *Mengzi ziyi shuzhen*, Zhang Xiaolin sums up:

In the *Tianzhu shiyi*, Matteo Ricci had recourse to the classics to show that the Neo-Confucian exegesis of the Cheng brothers and of Zhu Xi had changed the original meaning of the Confucian texts, developing a cosmology based on the *taiji* and *li* which comes close to Taoism. The philosophical use of philology in the *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng* of Dai Zhen and the method of argumentation in the *Tianzhu shiyi* are the same. Ricci also had recourse to the classics, and condemned the ontology, based on the *li*, of the Confucianism of the Song dynasty, which does not correspond to the original meaning of the classics, but is connected, according to him, to the ideas of Laozi, Zhuangzi and Buddha. In conclusion, we can say that the philosophical works of Dai Zhen have been directly influenced by the *Tianzhu shiyi*.¹⁶

Same as the exegesis of Ricci, the one of Dai Zhen is not a pure return to the original text, but at the service of a new philosophy. Here also, Zhang Xiaolin shows that Dai Zhen was directly influenced by Ricci. Even though his philosophical system, imbued of naturalism, remains very different from Ricci's, he has borrowed from the *Tianzhu shiyi* several views on human nature, for example as human nature being distinct and separated from other species. Man is made of desires, feelings and intellect, with the third element playing the most important role. In the realm of morality, the capacity of distinguishing between good and evil comes from the intellect. This intellectualism goes against the Neo-Confucian tradition which holds moral intuitionism, based on a non-rational or pre-rational capacity to know the good. Yet, Zhang Xiaolin warns against the danger to overemphasize Ricci's influence over Dai Zhen. Contrarily to the followers of Confucian monotheism, he remained essentially Confucian. Moreover, while he has inherited many ideas from Ricci, he never quoted him and avoided mentioning concepts explicitly foreign to Confucianism. This reserve to the new knowledge from the West can be explained not only by historical reasons (i.e., the proscription of Christianity mentioned above), but also by the fundamental differences between two philosophical systems.¹⁷

Ricci's influence over these three thinkers play an important role in Zhang Xiaolin's argumentation, since it allows him to prove that the "Confucian monotheism" initiated by Ricci and the Chinese Christians came into dialogue with some major thinkers of Confucianism at that time, constituting a new current, both distinct and integrated to the whole. Instead of considering Ricci's thought within Confucianism, as an attempt to subvert Confucianism from within, Zhang Xiaolin proposes to take the measure of the novelty introduced in Chinese intellectual history, and at the same time to integrate it to the whole. The reception of Ricci's thought

¹⁶ Zhang Xiaolin, 318

¹⁷ Zhang Xiaolin, 327

should be clearly distinguished from orthodox Confucianism, in order to go beyond the “reserve” of intellectuals like Dai Zhen and to underline its specificity.¹⁸

Zhang Xiaolin’s book could therefore serve as the first chapter of the history of this new school of Confucian Christianity in China. “Confucian monotheism” would then represent not the completion of Confucianism, according to the plan of Ricci, but would mark the beginning of a new tradition. This way, the project of Christianity in China is brought back to more modest dimensions, not correcting Confucianism, but opening a tradition, distinct from Confucianism. As Zhang says:

Neo-Confucianism has no need of monotheism; the other Chinese traditions, like Buddhism and Taoism, did not need in the past this kind of monotheism, and do not need it now. But this does not mean that Chinese culture cannot welcome this new system of thought, even based on religious faith. The appearance of Confucian monotheism in the history of thought at the end of the Ming, as well as its influence, more and more acknowledged in the subsequent history of Chinese thought, is a proof by itself. In other word, it does not matter whether the orthodox Confucian tradition and the Chinese intellectual tradition accepts it or not, what matter is that its influence has become a reality. We can even say that, on the point of view of the recent research, it has become, from the end of the Ming, a part and a branch of the Chinese intellectual tradition. It already belongs to this intellectual tradition, in which it constitutes an independent branch, distinct from Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. If we do not acknowledge this reality already established, it is very difficult to describe in a complete way the intellectual history since the Ming until today.¹⁹

In other word, “Confucian monotheism” has not received in the intellectual history of China the position which it deserves because it has been treated at the margins of the history of Confucianism. On the contrary, if we enlarge the perspective to the whole of an intellectual tradition which is plural, it becomes a fourth tradition since the end of the Ming.

Zhang Xiaolin remarks that most of the European sinologists, like Gernet or Zürcher, see the introduction of Christianity in 17th and 18th centuries in China as a failure. However, Zhang Xiaolin considers that the ideas which were introduced at that time have continued to be propagated, and this despite the proscription of Christianity. Historians underline the failure of institutional Christianity to disseminate in China, but overlook the persistence and propagation of ideas carried by Christianity. That is to say, Christianity was not defeated at the intellectual level. As Ge Zhaoguang, Zhang Xiaolin sees in Ricci the beginning of the introduction of modernity and the beginning of a long process of dismantling tradition, which ended with its collapse three hundred years later.²⁰ Confucian monotheism introduced elements of modernity which ended up by undermining the whole of tradition.

As we can see, Zhang Xiaolin’s position is not *in fine* very different from the one of Ge Zhaoguang. Even if Zhang acknowledges that there is pluralism in Chinese thought and a capacity to absorb elements from the outside, the entry of a fourth current of thought has undermined the tradition from within. The conflict seems less

¹⁸ Zhang Xiaolin mentions here the pioneer work of Zhang Xuezhi, who devoted one individual chapter to address the issue of the reception of Christian ideas. Cf. Zhang Xuezhi, *Mingdai zhexue shi* 明代哲学史 (*Histoire intellectuelle des Mings*) (Beijing : Peking University Press, 2000), 687-730.

¹⁹ Zhang Xiaolin, 346

²⁰ Zhang Xiaolin, 349.

direct, but the result is the same. Therefore, this “Confucian monotheism” seems to me having an ambiguous status, since, even though it claims to be Confucian, it would have undermined the whole tradition, including Confucianism. In the end, the collapse of the Chinese tradition in the twentieth century means the collapse of Confucianism, but also of “Confucian monotheism,” since how this one could remain without Confucianism? “Confucian monotheism” would have brought elements of modernity which would have led not only to the dissolution of Chinese tradition, but also, and paradoxically, to its own dissolution.

Along the line of Zhang Xiaolin, we can say that many intellectuals in the twentieth century were imbued with Christian ideas. It is enough here to mention Hu Shi 胡适, Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, and the other leaders of the New Culture Movement, as well as the artisans of the renewal of Confucianism, like Liang Shuming 梁漱溟, Feng Youlan 冯友兰, Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 among others. At different degrees, all of them accepted some ideas from monotheism, for example through the categories of Western metaphysics. The vitality of Christianity today proves also that the idea of monotheism has survived the eclipse of Confucianism. Monotheism developed in the twentieth century as a version of Western Christianity, with little connection to the tradition, compared to Confucian monotheism. The so-called “cultural Christians” (*wenhua jidutu* 文化基督徒) profess a monotheism which is very critical of Confucianism. Apparently it seems that Christian ideas are more alive today than Confucianism. And yet, I would suggest that we go beyond the discourse on the collapse of the tradition, and instead, that we examine more carefully the deeper continuities.

Conclusion

The two authors have done an important work in reading Ricci’s texts. Yet their main interest was to assess Ricci’s legacy in the context of the fate of Chinese culture today. Ge Zhaoguang’s position is quite extreme since he sees in Ricci the dismantling of the tradition: even if this one strived to wear the Confucian garb, the knowledge and beliefs that he introduced could not be absorbed by traditional culture and finally caused its collapse. Zhang Xiaolin takes a milder stance, establishing a fourth movement, Confucian monotheism, next to orthodox Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. This current was integrated into the intellectual scene under the Qing, but stopped with the rupture with tradition.

I have attempted to present the ideas of these two authors as fairly as possible, but also in a critical way. He seems to me that a cultural tradition is a living thing. In the life of a culture, like in the life of any person, it may happen some changes and re-orientations, but I am quite skeptic about ruptures which are superficially overblown, since they tend to hide deeper continuities. We touch here the ambiguity of the status of Ricci. In one hand, he brought deep changes to China which cannot be denied. But in the other hand, the status, often disproportionate which is given to him, either to underline his positive role on China’s quest for modernity, or his negative role on the tradition, indicates a point of tension, not yet resolved, in the relation of China towards the West. Perhaps in a near future, China will become less anxious about its own future and will analyze Ricci’s legacy in a more dispassionate way.