

The Missionary as Medium: China and the Origins of Enlightenment Tolerance

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ABSTRACT: The paper focuses on the early modern imagination of China in Europe and its contribution to the Early Enlightenment. It sets out by recalling the precarious condition of the Early Modern missionary understood as a complex medium of intercultural exchange. In the second step, the article engages with the Jesuit mission from a media philosophical perspective and investigates the specific form of subjectivity it fostered to then focus on the intracatholic quarrels and the central figure of the missionary Domingo Navarrete who contributed to a mission-critical Enlightenment discourse that culminated in a politics of tolerance and the rise of European secularism.

KEYWORDS: China Mission; Medium; European Enlightenment; Navarrete; Tolerance.

Any history of East–West intellectual exchange needs to place the missionary at its centre. In spite of being “convertist” by profession, Christian missionaries who were travelling East during the 16th and 17th centuries were pioneers of intercultural encounters. They are the embodiment of the first wave of intellectual — as well as spiritual — globalisation. Whereas the treasure-hunting endeavours of the East–India companies

paved the way for colonial exploitation and the unlimited exchange of goods and people that came to signify globalisation, missionaries engaged in a different kind of voyage: a neo-apostolic journey that launched a communicative revolution at a global level.¹ They travelled on the same vessels as merchants and mercenaries, and yet embarked on a rather different and spiritually motivated quest. Christian — and primarily Catholic — missionaries paved the way for an enterprise that achieved less as well as more than the spread of salvation. The intercultural communication that was intended as a mere tool of the Christian mission to China has turned into its lasting legacy. The missionaries established the hermeneutic models for the encounter between the religious and philosophical movements prevalent at the different extremes of the Eurasian land mass. Early missionaries have thus rightly been seen as the founders of modern Sinology.² More significantly, they have also launched the unfinished project of an intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Jesuits, Dominicans, and Franciscans

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The Virgin of Navigators, 1535, Alejo Fernández. Seville, Spain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Retablo_virgen_mareantes_1_Alcazar_Seville_Spain.jpg

paved the way for a planetary exchange of ideas by setting sail to the East. Their fates were left to the mercy of the Virgin of Navigators without knowing if, when, and in which physical and spiritual shape they would return.

The significance of this fateful encounter of cultural spheres by far exceeds what has been criticised as the ruthless and violent one-way street of European colonialism and its ideological pillars of a naïve faith in exceptionalism coupled with an expansionist ideology.

What are the transformations brought about by the early China mission from a media philosophical

perspective? In what way were the missionaries more than senders to communicate the “Happy News” of Christianity to subjects deemed in need of conversion for the sake of salvation? What are the repercussions from the initial intellectual discovery of the Eastern corners of the world in Europe? In the following, I will take up these questions and argue that the “missionary” is best understood as a specific kind of what I call “complex medium”. Complex media are media that transport more than they proclaim or are intended for. As McLuhan reminded us, “the medium is the message.”³ It was not the semantic content of Christianity that constituted the specific nature of the missionary as a medium, but rather their *practice of transcultural adaptation and transformation*. A significant number of the missionaries who did return to Europe after having lived in China are said to have been dressed in traditional Chinese clothes when stepping off the boat again in Lisbon. Unlike Odysseus, the missionaries did not return empty-handed after their sojourns in the Middle Kingdom. First, they brought the classical sources, including the four Confucian books and the five Chinese classics to Europe. Furthermore, their reports introduced European readers to Chinese geography, cuisine and what was seen as a curious culture with often inverted and yet highly developed rites and traditions, the Confucian *li* 禮. More importantly, beyond the transmission of ideas and knowledge of Chinese geography and culture, the missionary reports from the East changed the self-perception of Christian Europe. While the missionaries may have intended, with varying degrees of success, to expand the scope of Christianity across the globe by converting as many “infidels” as possible, their homecomings launched a more decisive and unforeseeable revolution and conversion in Europe. They may not have rescued as many souls as they would have liked, but they did contribute to a shift and expansion of horizons. At the risk of overgeneralisation one can assert that the discoveries of the missionaries contributed to a strangely transformed self-perspective on Europe. From now on

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Christian Europe would not be the centre, but be a Far West when seen from the newly discovered centre in the East. Some of the best minds of Europe understood that the continent had to curb its ambitions and missionary tendencies and learn to see itself as a relatively small peninsula at the Western outskirts of Eurasia. The reports about China, in particular, had significant repercussions and contributed to a radical transformation of Early Modern European subjectivity. The correction of a naïve and assertive self-centredness gave rise to a yearning for the East in the form of, depending on one's evaluation, Sinophilia or Chinamania. In terms of aesthetic innovations, Chinoiserie became the aesthetic avantgarde, not only, but especially in aristocratic circles with a taste for the exotic.

The travel accounts from the missionaries contributed, directly as well as indirectly, to countless attempts at recreating the “white gold” porcelain — china — decorated with exotic motifs. In terms of intellectual developments, the missions' European afterlife contributed to the rise of Euro-Confucianism, Euro-Daoism and Euro-Buddhism. Little known is the contribution of the early mod-

ern imagination of China to the emergence of a new discourse on toleration between the different “sects” of Christianity and the other monotheistic and polytheistic contenders for the status of being the “true religion”.⁴ Increasingly, the toleration of different religions, agnosticism and even atheisms was to follow as a consequence of an engagement with the East. From now on, a new form of self-corrective universal narrative became authoritative: “good Europeans” would have a bad conscience when being merely European. To counteract the risk of philosophical and religious monolingualism and provincialism, enlightened citizens would need to cultivate a distinctively modern form of cosmopolitan sensitivity that would reflect the plurality of forms of life and ways of sense making. To underscore the importance of Asia for these briefly sketched developments, this essay will set out by recalling the precarious condition of the Early Modern missionary understood as a complex medium of intercultural exchange (I). In the second step, the article will engage with the Jesuit mission from a media philosophical perspective and investigate the specific form of subjectivity it fostered (II) to then focus on the intracatholic quarrels and the central figure of the missionary Domingo Navarrete (III) who contributed to a mission-critical Enlightenment discourse that culminated in a politics of tolerance and the rise of European secularism (IV).

I. The Missionary as Medium

In the following it will be argued that missionary reports from the Far East contributed, sometimes inadvertently, to the first wave of self-critical Enlightenment thinking that lives on as an unfinished project. Missionaries are thus not only apostles of Christian faith, unilateral sending media for religious indoctrination. Rather than spreading the spiritual benefits of salvation, they served as pioneers and complex media of intercultural communication and a reversal of the direction of transmission. Just as a spiritual “medium” enables a communication between this world and a



Porcelain with *Chinoiserie*, collection Ludwig, Bamberg, Germany. Photo by Mario Wenning.

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transcendent world populated by spirits, a missionary, understood as a complex medium, allows for the communication between different belief systems, which are traditionally referred to as religions, philosophies, or cultures. In the process of intercultural transmission between home and host culture and vice versa, the figure of the missionary is not a neutral communication device. Rather than enabling the undistorted flow of information from culture A to culture B, and vice versa, missionaries absorb, transform, develop and thereby alter the information transmitted. The process of encountering a foreign tradition creates repercussions. If they are not only serving self-confirming ends, the missionary reports and the subsequent attempts at interpretation of these reports give rise to sophisticated feedback loops. It would soon become clear that the China reports had the potential to trigger a cognitive as well as existential paradigm shift. As a consequence, both culture A and culture B change significantly as a result of this communicative encounter. As an — often unintended — feature of intercultural communication, the converting “senders” are thus being transformed into “receivers” and, ultimately, into “transponders” who, either intentionally or unintentionally, transform the exchanged messages in processes of appropriation that involve creative reinterpretations and complex feedback loops. As complex media, missionaries thus serve, at the same time or in subsequent stages, as senders, receivers, and transformers. Missionaries are complex media in a further sense. In the process of serving as human pioneers and embodied bridges between cultural traditions, convertists like the famous Matteo Ricci and the largely forgotten Domingo Navarrete engaged in an existential transformation process, which had repercussions in their home and host cultures.

To better understand what is at stake in these multidirectional transmission and transformation processes that are easily overlooked in conventional accounts of the mission, it is helpful to recall the conditions under which the early mission to China

unfolded. The journey of the missionaries from Europe to China required an abundance of time, a willingness to undergo radical adventures by taking on existential risks, and a heightened dosage of intellectual-religious zealotry. Let us unpack these necessary conditions for the possibility of the Early Modern China Mission one by one. In contrast to the modern tourist or the migrant worker, early modern missionary travellers were engaged in what seems now an unbearably slow form of travel. Setting sail to distant and culturally unexplored regions of America, Africa, and especially Asia required an existential commitment that is at odds with modern expectation of comfort and controlled levels of risk exposure. The temporal horizon of such missions is one of slowness. Before even encountering the host culture’s traditions, missionaries had to spend years on ships. The uncertainties of maritime life presented the ultimate test of a missionary’s commitment. The ships of — spiritual — fools included adventurers who could hardly know whether they would arrive at their destination and what they were getting into in setting sail to new shores, not to mention whether they would ever return. The separation from one’s spiritual community, while simultaneously expanding its scope by carrying its core spiritual convictions was reinforced by the hardships of life at sea. It was common to suffer from fevers and potentially deadly diseases, especially scurvy, which was wide spread among maritime voyagers; the voyage was characterised by a lack of fresh food, bad odours and extreme heat, especially in the regions close to the equator. The conditions on board were a test to any human organism’s resilience; the danger of shipwreck was constantly looming, especially when sailing around the Cape of Good Hope and through the South China Sea with its frequent typhoons; there were many attacks by pirates. To illustrate what was at stake during these precarious voyages, one can recall the, for the missionaries, catastrophic year 1673. From a total of 28 Jesuits who had departed from Lisbon only 15 arrived in Goa; from the 12 missionaries who set out

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for China, only one arrived in Macao.⁵ If ever, the term “suicide mission” is an apt description for this form of spiritual self-sacrifice. Surviving these challenges could contribute to a religious reaffirmation of one’s spiritual vocation or pose a radical challenge to one’s faith. To make matters worse, communication with one’s sending community was almost impossible. An answer to a letter, if received, would require a number of years. The sender may have passed away by the time the response would arrive. However, the growing distance to one’s intellectual and spiritual sending community when being “cut loose” could also compel the missionary to open up to new experiences in the foreign societies in ways that are hardly imaginable from today’s perspective. A high degree of adaptability was not only required during the journey in spatially confined vessels. If they were lucky enough to survive and arrive alive at their destination, the missionaries had to engage in intensive processes of learning the difficult local languages and customs (gift giving, kowtowing, ancestor worship etc.). Many of the early missionaries managed to confront these challenges to a degree that continues to serve as models for a life of resilience and extreme adaptability. In an environment that was often hostile to their very presence, not to mention their mission to convert, they needed to be both careful and inventive. This highly decelerated form of voyaging from a home into a host culture under condition of slowness and existential risk required a certain form of subjectivity.

During the first phase of the China mission, the majority of missionaries were natives of Portugal, Italy, Spain and, only to a lesser extent, from the Netherlands, Germany and France. The Portuguese profited not only from their geographical location at the Western outskirts of Europe, but also from the “Padroado” arrangement that secured Portugal a monopoly of overseeing the early mission to Asia, especially via the passage around Africa and India (while the Spanish travelled via America). It was only during the second half of the 17th and during the 18th centu-

ries that the French mission became prominent. The fact that the first generations of spiritual voyages of discovery departed and returned to Mediterranean and especially Iberian harbours had significant repercussions for the initial wave of deciphering the message in a bottle and appropriating the spiritually explosive cargo that returned with the missionaries. While being Christian monarchies, the Iberian nations also looked back on the historical experience of a comparatively tolerant Muslim rule during the reign of Al-Andalus (711–1492). The rest of Europe was still in the midst of the Dark Ages when Portugal and Spain embarked on the first wave of globalisation and, as will be elaborated later, Enlightenment toleration.

America had already been discovered by Columbus with the support of the Spanish crown. The discovery of the “New World” had already transformed Europe into the Old World. Yet, there was no temptation to adapt oneself to what was being perceived as a little developed culture of savages. In contrast to the conception of America as a “wilderness” to be taken, explored and settled, the awareness of China was radically different. The Middle Kingdom revealed the cracks in the naïve and arrogant assumption that Europe was the centre of civilisation, including the centre of true faith. The loss of peripheries due to the voyages of discovery, while departing from European ports, paradoxically contributed to an early putting into perspective of European arrogance.⁶ The messengers who had been to the Far East created a new form of an inter-cultural switch of perspectives. Karl Löwith points to the importance of the missionary accounts to critically put into perspective Europe’s previously self-evident identity: “Europe began to see itself and its Christian identity from the perspective of the Orient for the first time in modern history and to thereby critically distance itself from itself”.⁷ China appeared, when seen from the perspective of Europe, according to Löwith, as an “inverted world” that set what was self-evident on its head and contributed to an Enlightenment form of putting oneself into perspective in the spirit of intercultural encounter.

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The maritime nations on the Iberian Peninsula, as well as Italy, had significant historical and geographical advantages when opening up to the East. The docks of Lisbon, Genoa and the Puerto de Indias in Seville became the new gates of an intercultural change of perception. While scholars have repeatedly highlighted the importance of Asian sources for central European thinkers in Britain (Hume, Tindal, Locke), France (Voltaire, Malebranche, Montesquieu, Bayle) and Germany (Leibniz, Wolff), their Mediterranean predecessors and their pioneering contributions in shaping the image of the East are often reduced to a footnote in the history of transmission.⁸

The central European missionaries and thinkers drew on their Mediterranean brothers when popularizing the mission in Europe. Nicolas Trigault (1577–1628) and especially Philippe Couplet (1623–1693) were influential in establishing the image of Confucius as a philosopher. Couplet published annotated translations of three out of the four Confucian classics in his *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (1687).

After the publication of the initial translations of Chinese classics into Latin, the earliest translations of Chinese texts into modern European languages were into Spanish and Portuguese, e.g. the translation of *Beng Sim Po Cam* with the Spanish title *Espejo rico del*

claro corazón by the Dominican Juan Cabo in 1592.

The early Southern European imagination of China was crucial because it is based on first-hand experiences in Asia. It contributed to the initial wave of Sinophilia that was only later replaced by Sinophobia. The contemporaries of the first China Mission who had stayed in Europe were able to reflect on the content that was washed up on Iberian shores with the excitement genuine to the age of discovery. From now on, it would no longer be sufficient to contemplate eternal truths and metaphysical speculations from the secure perspective of one's desk and fireplace, as Descartes had proposed. After the missionary reports became widely known in Europe, one would have to engage with actual cultural alterity coming from the distant corners of the world. Rather than engaging in rational introspection, philosophers needed to see far in order to have a better understanding of the cultural peculiarities and their own culturally induced blind spots. An intercultural technique of tele-vision and tele-perception as well as tele-communication became a new mode of critical self reflection. As a consequence, Europe's self image was being reframed. Translation of key philosophical and religious sources from the East to the West and vice versa became the core auxiliary discipline documenting this shift. From now on the world was no longer characterised by an ontology of unbridgeable limits and universal categories, but by the overstepping, traversing, translating and overcoming of cultural, linguistic as well as spiritual boundaries. The earth, symbolised by the invention of globes and world maps during the 16th and 17th centuries, became a round or "spherical" object that called for being circumnavigated, measured and, most importantly, interpreted.⁹

The leading role of the missionary as a complex medium of intercultural exchange can be summarised in terms of the transformation from being a harbinger of salvation to being a medium of cultural transmission. The following glimpse at the Jesuit Mission and the specific "esprit de corps" it cultivated



Confucius, *Philosopher of the Chinese, or, Chinese Knowledge Explained in Latin* (1687), produced by a team of Jesuits led by Philippe Couplet. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:LifeAndWorksOfConfucius1687.jpg>

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allows to better conceptualise the transformation of perspectives triggered by the China Mission.

II. Jesuit Missionaries: Travelling Corpses

Historiographical accounts of the early modern encounter between Europe and China tend to emphasise the key role of the Society of Jesus. Founded by the religious awakening experiences of Francisco de Loyola, the Jesuits were the avant-garde of the Counter Reformation. Loyola was a general par excellence. Wounded by a cannon ball when defending Spanish Pamplona against French invaders, he underwent a religious conversion by reading travel novels and inventing the spiritual exercises that came to be the psychotechnological trademark of the Jesuits. These exercises, many of which involve the vivid imagination of hell, would become the closest Christian equivalent to meditation practices usually associated with Asian Religions. While they do not emphasise corporal exhaustion, Ignatian exercises are heated forms of spiritual concentration intended to “set the world on fire.”¹⁰

The Jesuits following in Ignatius Loyola’s footsteps transformed themselves into auto-instrumentalising media. The Jesuit subject is a combination of passion and discipline, a zealous tool that would become famous for its capacity to bend beyond recognition for the sake of advancing the mission. The goal to contribute to the evangelisation of China justifies the means of cultural adaptation. In the words of Ignatius, a missionary needed to subject himself completely or: *perinde ac si cadaver essent*, obey as if he would be a corpse. Being a corpse-like tool in the unconditional service of the pope, the hyper-medium in the Vatican, Jesuit missionaries were medial satellites to spread Catholic faith to the distant corners of the world. Jesuits can be understood as zombie-like travelling media who combined missionary zeal and unconditional obedience. Given the temporal constraints impeding a reasonably timely communication, the Jesuit missionaries were satellites out of steering reach, autotelic corpses who were cut off from ground control and thus enjoyed a certain leeway when being out on their own.

The Jesuit China mission heavily imitated and developed the strategies of the Protestant media revolution that highlighted the monopoly of writing and faith (*sola scriptura, sola fidei*). Jesuits dominated the initial episodes of East–West exchange by way of introducing a variety of media techniques that drew on the magical repertoire for which the Catholic Church is famous. Francis Xavier, the earliest of the famous missionaries with an East-bound calling, set foot in India and Japan, without however fulfilling his vocation to enter the giant Chinese empire. He got very close though and died on the island of Sanchon on the Chinese coast on 3rd December, 1552. After Xavier’s demise, his holy corpse continued travelling. His body was later relocated and buried in Goa, the Portuguese outpost in India. The post-mortem journey of Xavier’s holy bones brought him back, at least in part, to Rome. Allegedly “tired from the baptism of thousands”, his severed lower right arm was returned to the Jesuit headquarters, the mother church of the Jesuit order Church of the Gesù in Rome. One of St. Francis Xavier toes enjoys the infamous reputation of being included in *Time’s* top 10 famous stolen body parts, while his humerus bone is displayed in Saint Joseph Seminary’s Church in Macao as a gesture that his long unfinished journey to China had been posthumously completed.

The globally dispersed relics of a saint such as St. Francis Xavier became the spiritual version of military outposts. They documented the global reach and spread of the world Church. Satellite episcopal seats with relics were set up as sending and receiving stations to encourage converters, the newly and not yet converted to aspire to spiritual heights and, if God wills, broadcast the Happy News and spread salvation. This strategic dispersal of the first-, second- and third-class relics is one of many media inventions of the proto-globalised spiritual enterprise of the World Church. These relics may strike the secular observer as necrophiliac remnants of magic; in fact they constitute modern attempts to establish spiritually connected global

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Relic of St. Francis Xavier, Saint Joseph Seminary Church, Macao. Photo by Mario Wenning.

networks. The outposts in the distant corners of the globe reflected the cosmopolitan ambitions of setting up a global religion that corresponded to the universalistic and unifying aspirations of zealous monotheism. The Catholic World Church realised what their supporting national governments could only dream of: an interconnection of the planet that was not limited by political, religious or cultural borders.

The Jesuit enterprise was characterised by a combination of an adventurous curiosity, military drill, and a radical talent at transcultural bending techniques that came to be known as “accommodation”. Xavier had already proclaimed the first rule of being a medium for the sake of the mission: *convertir es convertirse*, to convert means to be converted.¹¹ Matteo Ricci, St. Francis Xavier best-known successor in the China Mission, interpreted this motto of the reflexive missionary medium literally and became, together with Michele Ruggieri, the pioneer of adapting himself to Chinese traditions, even while, we may assume, preserving an inner distance from China. After travelling for four years, including an extended stay in Goa, Ricci arrived almost dead in the trading port of Macao on the 7th August, 1582. He stayed for almost three decades in China until his death in Beijing in 1610. Drawing on the cultural resources

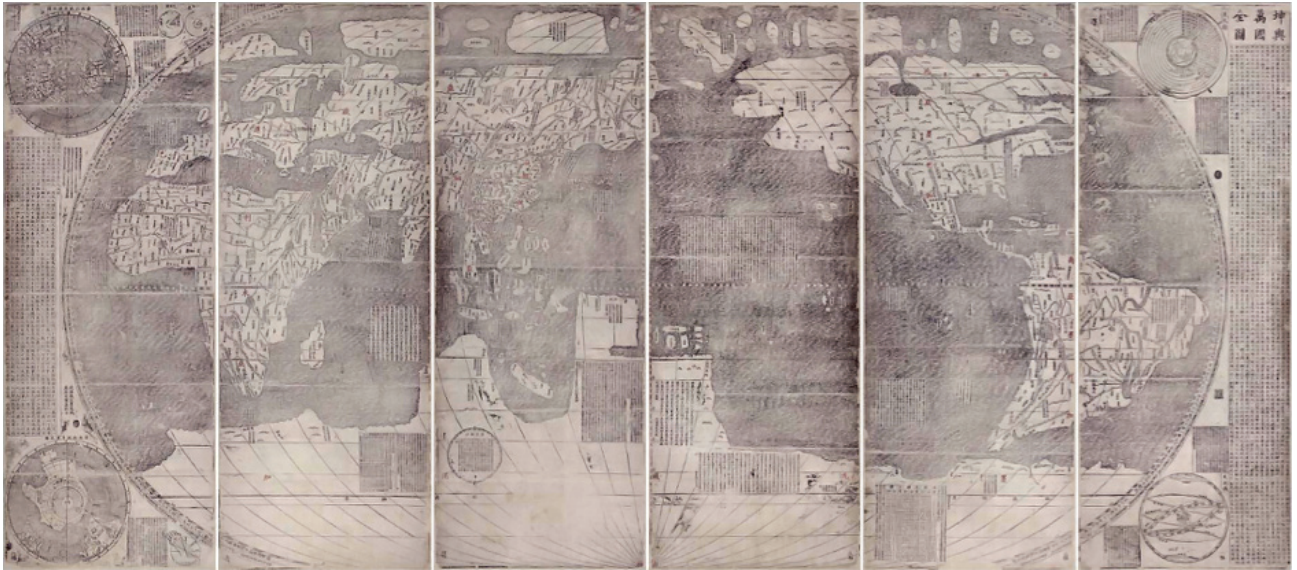
of a humanist education as well as extensive scientific and astronomical knowledge, Ricci can be considered the paradigm case of the Renaissance ideal of an *uomo universale*, a broadly educated polymath and an exemplary bending medium, whose charismatic appearance was also due to his ability to preserve a modest appearance.¹² However, it was his brilliant capacity at transcultural transformation that created his continuing legacy. The border crosser — or cross-over artist — Matteo Ricci transformed himself into Li Madou 利瑪竇 by dressing himself as a Buddhist monk and then, after the Buddhist costume failed to impress his Chinese interlocutors, in the dress of the Confucian *literati*.

Rather than preaching the gospel, Ricci lured his Chinese interlocutors with mechanical clocks, religious paintings, ethical sayings from the Epicurean and Stoical traditions. His notorious world map placed China at the centre rather than at the Eastern periphery and was thus an act of flattery more than an act of the friendship he propagated.

Ricci gives an account of the reasons for his relative fame in China in a letter from Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi Province, dated 4th November, 1595: 1) the capacity to speak and write Chinese, 2) a good memory, which allowed him to recite the four Confucian classics, 3) knowledge of mathematics (and Euclidean geometry), 4) the curious objects he carried with him, 5) his reputation for being an alchemist and 6) the Christian doctrines he teaches. Interestingly, he elaborates that “those who come for the last reason are the least numerous”.¹³ It became obvious to Ricci that the Jesuit mission practiced self-bending for the sake of converting the emperor in a strategy to work from the top downward did not proceed as planned. Yet, he died thinking optimistically that he had opened the door for the China Mission. Little did he expect that doors can be crossed in different directions as well as closed again.

While several generations of Jesuits worked in the service of the Ming Court, their contributions as

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Matteo Ricci's "A Map of the Myriad Countries of the World", 1602, Miyagi Prefectural Library, Japan. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ricci_Map_\(Miyagi_Prefectural_Library\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ricci_Map_(Miyagi_Prefectural_Library).jpg)

artists, calendar reformers and astronomers did not lead to the desired missionary success. At the risk of overgeneralisation, a preliminary conclusion of this investigation is that the missionary medium tends to transmit and receive other information from that intended message. *Convertir es convertirse* does, then, not only suggest that one needs to accommodate to the other culture in order to convert, but that a mis-

sionary is being accommodated and transformed by the very subjects he was trying to convert. More importantly, his messages transform the sending community in ways that are to a significant degree unpredictable and often beyond recognition.

From the perspective of media revolution, the early missionaries from the Far West served both as radical innovators and as brakes. The Jesuit Counter Reformation had adopted the most successful methods of the Reformation. Reminiscent of Luther's adaptation of German as the language of worship in Germany, in 1615 the Jesuit Nicolas Trigault convinced Pope Paul V to permit the missionaries to conduct the entire liturgy in Chinese rather than Latin. Moreover, from now on the missionaries were permitted to wear local dress. Trigault became an early traveling star missionary when he returned to Europe and, dressed as a Mandarin, toured the aristocratic courts of Madrid, Florence, Parma, Milan, Munich, Vienna, Paris, Brussels, and Cologne in an effort to collect books and funding for the China mission.

However, the Jesuits were also brakes to cultural transmission processes. While they did share some



Tomb of Matteo Ricci, Maweigou Church, Beijing. It is located in the grounds of the Beijing Administrative College, formally the Beijing Communist Party School. Photo by Mario Wenning.

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of the technological innovations with their Chinese interlocutors, for example in the area of cannon building, they stopped short of transferring essential innovations such as that of linear perspective. The Renaissance invention of linear perspective did not only revolutionise European aesthetics, but also contributed to European strategic advantages over China until the middle of the 19th century. The “enormous enlightenment campaign” by the Jesuits and in particular Ricci’s successor at the Ming court, the “perspective propagandist”¹⁴ Father Adam Schall von



Portrait of Nicolas Trigault in Chinese Costume. Peter Paul Rubens, 1617. Metropolitan Museum of Art. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait_of_Nicolas_Trigault_in_Chinese_Costume_MET_DT4409.jpg.

Bell, failed to bring about a perspectival revolution in China. The Middle Kingdom with the emperor at its epicentre continued to perceive itself as an absolute centre of emission until the loss of this status when subjected by European colonial regimes in the 1840s. Conversely, the Catholic Church continued to regard itself as a global media enterprise that was being remote controlled from the Vatican as the stand-in for God-on-earth. And yet, the early East–West encounter did have significant repercussions, the implications of which far exceeded the stated intention of the China Mission to spread the Christian faith.

The image of a radical change of perspective from being an emitting centre to becoming a participant of intercultural communication is somewhat misleading in that it presupposes a binary opposition between a sender and a receiver. In reality, the transformation processes of the first generation of missionaries were more complex as are revealed when considering the crucial role of Domingo Navarrete, a critic of the Jesuit travelling corpses who came to shape the European imagination of China before he was unjustly forgotten.

III. Reversal of Perspectives: The Critical Breakthrough of Domingo Navarrete

To claim that the processes of exchange and amalgamation during the China Mission during the tumultuous transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasty were path breaking suggests a unified network. This impression overlooks the internal differentiation of the China Mission. The rival missionary enterprises of Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans, and other denominations were engaged in a fierce competition that was only complicated by the even at least as severe rivalry between nationalities in the mission. To the Chinese observer, the disputes among the “Christian sects” from the Far West must have appeared strangely bizarre. The infighting of various missionary denominations must have suggested to even charitable observers that Christianity could hardly enlighten or even contribute to the

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spiritual culture of the Middle Kingdom that prided itself on its integrative and harmonising essence. It is thus not accidental that the Chinese were more interested in the technological rather than the theological expertise of the quarrelling missionaries.

Yet, in contrast to the competitive and often violent attempt to cut up the global cake by the competing imperial powers — Spain, England, France, Portugal and the Netherlands — Christianity formed a common point of reference that was shared by all missionaries. Christianity remained the “true religion” and the yardstick from which other traditions were measured. Christian faith in the unifying force of “Concordia” served as the spiritual bond for the internally divided apostolic project. At the surface, the internal frictions concerned the interpretation of Chinese ancestor worship and the proper translation of the essential concepts of religion, such as God and heaven. While the Jesuits argued for tolerating traditional Chinese ritual practices as social rites and considering Confucius as a “master of heaven” (*tianzhu* 天主), their critics considered this move to be theologically unfounded, if not outright blasphemous. At a deeper level, the debates concern the ethics and hermeneutics of encountering other religious and spiritual traditions. The following questions became important and have dominated methodological debates among intercultural philosophers ever since: How should one approach a person from a significantly different spiritual and intellectual background? How should one interpret foreign sacred texts and traditions? What unites and what divides human beings from different parts of the world?

The person who was the harshest critic of the Jesuit accommodation approach to these questions as well as an important link between the reports of China and Early European Enlightenment was the Dominican Domingo Fernández Navarrete. Dominicans were the chief rivals of the Jesuits in that they emphasised that humans ultimately needed to surrender to the saving grace of God, which the Jesuits challenged by emphasising individual freedom. Bearing the name of

the founder of the Dominican order Domingo Félix de Guzmán, Domingo Navarrete too was a “hound of the Lord” (*domini carnis*). This dog did not accept Jesuit bones. He is often blamed for contributing to the suppression of the Jesuit order. Drawing on the manuscript *De Confucio ejusque doctrina tractatus* by the Jesuit Niccolò Longobardo, he not only argued that the accommodation tactics of the Jesuits were not only on theologically shaky grounds, but that they were atheists. Indirectly, Navarrete contributed to a more radical critique of the very foundations and legitimacy of the mission.

Navarrete travelled extensively and spent significant parts of his life in China (primarily Fujian and Zhejiang provinces) in addition to extended stays in the Philippines, Mexico and Santo Domingo. He arrived in Macao in 1659, learnt Chinese and stayed in China until 1670. He was incarcerated with other, primarily Jesuit, missionaries in Guangzhou between 1666 and 1669 when he managed to escape. In spite of this negative experience, he had a profound appreciation for Chinese culture and is said to have returned to Europe dressed in Chinese clothing.

After his return to Madrid, Navarrete wrote the highly influential *Tratados históricos, políticos, éticos y religiosos de la monarquía de China* (1676) and *Controversias antiguas y modernas entre los misionarios de la Gran China* (1679). His *Tratados* (1676) was quickly translated into English, French, German, and Italian. Its impact on the formation of the European perspective on China can hardly be overestimated. Cummins, a specialist of Navarrete, summarises Navarrete’s venerating views of China as follows: “religion apart, they order things better in China”.¹⁵ Jonathan Spence muses: “Almost everything Chinese seems to have met with Friar Navarrete’s approbation: the ingenuity of China’s artisans, who ‘have their contrivances for everything’; the fact that Chinese schoolchildren had only eight ‘play-days’ a year and ‘no vacations at all’; even the benevolent nature of Chinese ‘piss,’ which helped Chinese crops to grow whereas European urine ‘burns and

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destroys all plants”¹⁶ Starting with the opening, the *Tratados* strikes the reader as a felicitous combination of travel literature and utopianism that was typical of Early Modern reports on China.

*The utmost Bounds of Asia, the noblest Part of the Universe, are the Seat of that, the most Glorious Empire in all natural respects, that the Sun ever shines upon. We Europeans vulgarly give it the Name of the Great China; and with good reason, for it is Great in all respects (...). The Empire of China has such plenty and even superfluity of all things that it would take up many Volumes to treat of them in particular. My Design is only to give some hints of what is most remarkable, which will suffice to make known how bountifully God has dealt with those People who know him not, giving them all they can desire, without being necessitated to seek for anything abroad (...). Where is there any country like unto this?*¹⁷

It would be misleading to interpret such passages as propaganda attempting to present Chinese civilisation in the most favourable light in order to solicit support for the mission. Robert Richmond Ellis sees Navarrete grappling with a genuine theological paradox: “that God has chosen to bestow his utmost favour on a people who do not even know him. This paradox haunts Navarrete’s entire text, ultimately disrupting his Christian/non-Christian dichotomisation of the world.”¹⁸ This disruption of cultural binaries and the challenge to the legitimacy of revealed religion was also performed at an existential level since Navarrete’s took on many customs from China such as the politeness and hospitality because they seemed genuinely attractive to him. As Ellis puts it, “he expresses a kind of cultural hybridity that functions to dislodge the centrality not only of China (a site traditionally regarded by its own inhabitants as the Middle Kingdom, or centre of the

earth) but also of Christian Europe.”¹⁹ This positioning in between cultural identities, “both and” as well as “neither nor” Domingo Navarrete and Min Mingwo 閔明我 allowed him to be a participant as well as a critical observer of both cultural traditions. For example, while appreciative of Chinese hospitality, he was critical of the treatment of girls in China; while emphasising the importance of empathy in Christian Europe, he was critical of the tendency of Europeans, especially European men, to be rude and disrespectful, especially when in groups. In contrast to Ellis’s claim that this commits Navarrete to a form of cultural relativism, his account is keen on emphasising reason as the main criterion for being considered a civilised culture. Taking the example of ritual suicide in Japan and the Spanish bullfight, he engages in an intercultural role swap or switch of perspectives. He debarbarises the cultural other — the Japanese samurai or the lizard-, donkey- and dog-eating Chinese — and imagines his own Spanish cultural identity symbolised by bullfighting as appearing cruel and barbaric when seen from the perspective of other cultures. Navarrete uses such examples of intercultural reversal to emphasise the enlightening function of intercultural exchange: “The Pagans and Gentiles have become the teachers of the Christian faithful.” What makes Navarrete’s engagement with the really existing heterotopia of China unique is its conceptual contribution to an ethics of transcultural encounter.

Rather than postulating an unbridgeable abyss between civilised Christian Europe and exotic and atheist China, Navarrete emphasises the need to debarbarise the cultural other and to see oneself as if one would be the true barbarian. Most importantly, he emphasises the role of reasoning and discursive practices in such practices of intercultural role taking. In this respect, he followed the trajectory of the Dominican Vittoria who had earlier argued for an *ius communicationis* in his treatise “On Indians”.

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Title page of *Tratados históricos, políticos, éticos y religiosos de la monarquía de China*, by Domingo Fernández Navarrete (Madrid, 1676). Biblioteca Virtual del Patrimonio Bibliográfico. https://bvpb.mcu.es/va/catalogo_imagenes/grupo.do?path=11000063&presentacion=pagina&posicion=2®istrardownload=0

As previously mentioned, the touchstone of the intracatholic quarrel between Jesuits and Dominicans was the question of ancestor worship and the question of allegation of atheism. Navarrete defended both of these charges in spite of his otherwise positive depiction of China. Based on his theological reservations, Navarrete was not only critical of the Jesuit practice of accommodation to practices of superstition. Drawing on Longobardo, he also revealed

tensions and contradictions between the Confucian classics and more recent Song-Ming Confucianism and thus significantly contributed to the tradition of intertextual criticism that breaks with the assumption that Chinese culture would be a homogeneous and internally coherent whole.

Navarrete's account of the complexity, richness and beauty of Chinese civilisation and nature was being widely read by, among others, Locke, Leibniz, and Voltaire. Voltaire refers to the "famous archbishop" Navarrete as "wise" and a "sage".²⁰ Bayle, Bossuet, Pascal also took part in the controversies of which Navarrete was the most outspoken representative. The critical Sinophilia and the conceptions of intercultural learning processes that was propagated by Navarrete culminated in Leibniz's claim that "it seems to me that we need missionaries from the Chinese who might teach us the use and practice of natural theology just as we have sent them teachers of true theology."²¹ Drawing on Navarrete's sympathetic report of a rationally ordered Chinese society (even if at the expense of revealed religion), Leibniz argued for the need to introduce Chinese literature next to Jewish, Muslim literature and learn to appreciate as well as to *critically evaluate* (*critic quidem iudicio*) this literature in Europe.²²

IV. The Critique of the China Mission and Enlightenment Toleration

The critical approach to the China Mission had significant implications for the Central European Enlightenment. Pierre Bayle critically engaged with the China Mission and attempted to combine a notion of cultural particularism and ethical universalism. His critical and encyclopaedic philosophy repeatedly draws on examples from Non-European cultural traditions.²³ As Ernst Cassirer points out, Bayle's *Critical Historical Dictionary* "constituted the real arsenal of all Enlightenment philosophy."²⁴ Starting with Bayle, Enlightenment discourse included a critical reflection on the missionary. In his "Philosophical Commentary"

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on the Biblical saying “compel them to come in” (Luke 14:23), Bayle stages an imaginary “conference” or dialogue between a Chinese emperor and Christian missionaries and concludes:

*This Emperor can't reasonably be condemned for judging from this first Interview, that the Religion of these Missionaries is ridiculous and diabolical: Ridiculous, as being founded by an Author; who on one hand requires all Men to be humble, meek, patient, dispassionate, ready to forgive Injuries; and on the other hand, bids 'em drub, imprison, banish, whip, hang, give up as a Prey to the Soldiers, all those who won't follow him. And Diabolical; because, besides its direct Repugnancy to the Lights of Reason, he must see that it authorizes all kind of Crimes, when committed for its own Advantage; allows no other Rule of Just and Unjust, but its own Loss and Gain; and tends to change the whole World into a dreadful Scene of Violence and Bloodshed.*²⁵

Bayle further refines his critique of the “ridiculous” and “diabolical” character of missionaries by revealing what he considers to be their underlying hypocrisy. The missionaries, according to Bayle, preach humility and practice violence. They “riggle themselves into the Kingdom of China under the appearance of great Moderation, and as so many Foxes, to turn Tigers and Lions in due time.”²⁶ The implication from the encounter with believers in other non-Christian faiths consists for Bayle in a practice of mutual perspective taking, rational deliberation and, most importantly, toleration, including the toleration of atheists. Bayle advanced Navarrete's interpretation of the Chinese as being atheists to argue that moral justifications needed to be developed independently of religious truth claims and that the freedom of conscience and the freedom of religion became a necessary condition for a well ordered liberal society.²⁷ It was thus interestingly the discovery of atheist China through the Christian

mission that contributed to the critique of the mission and to the rise of the modern conception of the freedom of religion and toleration.

V. Conclusion

Returning to our starting point, McLuhan's slogan “the medium is the message” takes on a perplexing meaning in the context of the early China Mission. We have interpreted the missionary as a complex medium who could be a Jesuit travelling corpse, a Dominican hound of the Lord, or, when seen from an Enlightenment perspective, a fox who turns into a wolf. What is the message that is being communicated by this perplexing medium? For one thing, the mission is not to be interpreted exclusively — or even primarily — from the perspective of whether it was successful in communicating the “Happy News” of the Gospel and thereby spreading salvation as it may have intended. The success on this front was rather limited. The Mission arguably failed when being measured from the perspective of converting significant numbers of Chinese to Christianity. It instead increased suspicion about the trustworthiness of the visitors from afar. In Europe, the aftermath of the names and rites controversies contributed to the prohibition of the Jesuit order, while in China the missionaries were being expelled. Yet, what the Mission did achieve was, paradoxically, a critical correction of the self-conception of Christian Europe at least among a few progressive thinkers including Pierre Bayle. From now on, Europe started to perceive itself as a “Far West”. Geographically, it became a relatively small appendix to the gigantic Eurasian land mass, a peninsula at the Western outskirts of Asia. More importantly, its spiritual and cultural traditions were questioned and increasingly perceived as contingent since they could now, by way of the missionary reports, be compared to at least equally sophisticated, but significantly different cultural others.

The missionary is a complex medium that undergoes a process of reversal. Interestingly, this did not escape McLuhan who analyses the “Reversal of the

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Overheated Medium” and points to a paradoxical turn of European expansion: “the Western world is going Eastern, even as the East goes Western.”²⁸ The China Mission marked not only the height of the overextension of European spirit, but also the breaking point that initiated a radical change of perspective triggered by the interplay, momentous fusion, and complex role

play of East and West. The new spirit of toleration and the call for the freedom of religion would become the new post-missionary creed of the Enlightenment. The missionary is thus a medium that contributed to its own impossibility. This story confirms the deeper insight behind St. Francis Xavier's motto: “to convert means to be converted”. **RC**

NOTES

- 1 For an overview of the role of missionaries in the formation of early globalisation see Nayan Chanda, *Bound Together: How Traders, Preachers, Adventurers, and Warriors Shaped Globalization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital: Towards a Philosophical Theory of Globalization* (Malden MA: Polity, 2013). Luke Clossey, *Salvation and Globalization in the Early Jesuit Missions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- 2 See David E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1989). Lionel M. Jensen advanced the controversial thesis that the Jesuits have significantly contributed to the modern image of Confucius and Confucianism in *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
- 3 Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1994), 7-21.
- 4 Heiner Roetz, “The Influence of foreign knowledge on 18th century European secularism,” in *Religion and Secularity: Transformations and Transfers of Religious Discourses in Europe and Asia*, eds. Marion Eggert and Lucian Hölscher (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2013), 9-33.
- 5 For a detailed account of the catastrophic events of 1673 see Felix Alfred Plattner, *Jesuiten zur See: Der Weg nach Asien* (Zurich: Atlantis, 1946), 138-141.
- 6 In a related manner, Dipesh Chakrabarty pursues the task of a “provincialization” of Europe. Chakrabarty overlooks that what I call a putting into perspective of Europe has already occurred in Early Modernity. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
- 7 Karl Löwith, “Bemerkungen zum Unterschied von Orient und Okzident” [“Remarks on the Difference between Orient and Occident”], in *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1983), 571-601, 575.
- 8 See, for example, the lack of Iberian perspectives in the otherwise impressive engagement with the Enlightenment in Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), and his *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Other examples of largely ignoring the pioneering role of Mediterranean perspectives on China include William W. Appleton, *A Cycle of Cathay: The Chinese Vogue in England during the 17th and 18th Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951); Basil Guy, *The French Image of China Before and After Voltaire* (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1963) and René Etiemble, *L'Europe chinoise*, vol. 2: *De la sinophilie à la sinophobie* (Paris: J. Foch 1989). A welcome exception to the trend of overlooking the crucial first-hand accounts of China and their importance for the Enlightenment is Jürgen Osterhammel's *Unfabling the East: The Enlightenment's Encounter with Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).
- 9 Peter Sloterdijk, *Globes: Spheres II*, transl. W. Hoban (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014).
- 10 Erin M. Cline draws on this pyrotechnical image to argue for a neoapostolic arsonism via a global dispersal of Ignatian methods to other religious traditions in *A World on Fire: Sharing the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises with Other Religions* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2018).
- 11 Cited in Agustín Muñoz Vidal, “Pintores jesuitas en la Corte china (siglos XVII y XVIII),” *Revista Española del Pacífico*, vol. 7 (1997): 86-99.
- 12 Jonathan D. Spence, *Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Penguin, 1985); Michela Fontana, *Matteo Ricci: A Jesuit in the Ming Court* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011).
- 13 Matteo Ricci, *Opere storiche del P. Matteo Ricci*, 2:209, quoted in Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 18.

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- Commenting on this autobiographical remark, Yu Liu interprets Ricci's appropriation approach as a combination of blending in and standing out in *Seeds of a Different Eden* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 45.
- 14 Friedrich Kittler, *Optical Media: Berlin Lecture 1999* (Polity, 2012), 68–69. For Kittler, the invention of the camera obscura and the lanterna magica by the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher is the central motor of the Counter Reformation and its optical media revolution. Kircher transformed the way of viewing by representing imaginary objects and thereby “paint the devil on the wall”. Hans Belting *Florenz und Bagdad: Eine westöstliche Geschichte des Blicks* (Munich: Beck, 2009), 142.
 - 15 James Cummins, *A Question of Rites: Friar Domingo Navarrete and the Jesuits in China* (Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1993), 6. For additional accounts of Navarrete's largely favourable conception of China see Manel Ollé, “A China de Domingo Fernandez de Navarrete,” *Revista de Cultura/Review of Culture*, no. 28, 2008, 42–55. Instituto Cultural de Macau, as well as Anna Busquets Alemany, “Más allá de la Querella de los Ritos: el testimonio sobre China de Fernández de Navarrete,” *Anuario de Historia de la Iglesia*, vol. 24, 2015, 220–250.
 - 16 Jonathan Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (London: Norton, 1998, 101).
 - 17 Domingo Fernandez Navarrete, *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, eds. Awnsham Churchill and John Churchill, 4 volumes, vol. 1 (London, 1704), 1.
 - 18 Robert Richmond Ellis, *They Need Nothing: Hispanic-Asian Encounters of the Colonial Period* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 103.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, 108.
 - 20 *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*, quoted in Robert Richmond Ellis, *They Need Nothing: Hispanic-Asian Encounters of the Colonial Period* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 99.
 - 21 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Der Briefwechsel mit den Jesuiten in China (1689-1714)* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2006).
 - 22 Heiner Roetz writes: the “self-critical missionary Navarrete (...) says, agreeing with Leibniz, ‘It is god's special providence, that the Chinese did not know what is done in christendome, for if they did, they would spit in our faces.’” Heiner Roetz, “The Influence of foreign knowledge on 18th century European secularism,” in *Religion and Secularity: Transformations and Transfers of Religious Discourses in Europe and Asia*, eds. Marion Eggert and Lucian Hölscher (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2013). Leibniz was influenced by Navarrete in his appreciation of China and the emphasis on the need for an informed as well as critical engagement between Europe and China.
 - 23 Simon Kow acknowledges that Bayle's “complex treatment burst the presumptions of a proselytizing European Christendom and of an uncritical idealization of China as a rational society of atheists.” “Enlightenment Universalism? Bayle and Montesquieu on China”, *The European Legacy*, vol. 19: 3, 2014, 347–58. 351–52. On Bayle's conception of China as a “morally decent society of atheists” see Simon Kow's *China in Early Enlightenment Political Thought*, (London: Routledge: 2018), 57–67.
 - 24 Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 167.
 - 25 Pierre Bayle, *A Philosophical Commentary on these Words of the Gospel, Luke 14.23, “Compel them to come in, that my house may be full”*, eds. John Kilcullen and Chandran Kukathas (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005).
 - 26 *Ibid.*, 101.
 - 27 Rainer Forst, *Toleration in Conflict: Past and Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), especially chapter 5.
 - 28 Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1994), 35.

