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The Cultural Accommodation and Linguistic Activities of the Jesuits in China in the 16th–18th Centuries

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Abstract: From the 16th to the 18th century, Jesuit missionaries in China pioneered intercultural exchange by integrating cultural accommodation with groundbreaking linguistic research. By adopting Confucian scholarly practices and systematically studying the Chinese language, they developed innovative approaches to Chinese phonetics, grammar, lexicography, rhetoric, and teaching. Their linguistic achievements not only facilitated missionary work but also contributed to early modern sinology and cross-cultural communications. This paper examines the Jesuits' dual strategy of cultural accommodation and linguistic research, demonstrating how their deep engagement with Chinese intellectual traditions enabled them to study the Chinese language successfully, to communicate with local elites smoothly, and to disseminate Christianity effectively. Through the combination of local philological traditions with Western linguistic techniques, they introduced new perspectives on the Chinese language, influencing both Western sinology and China's linguistic development. Their translations of religious, scientific, and philosophical texts also played a key role in shaping Sino-Western intellectual exchanges. By analyzing the Jesuits' linguistic activities and the strategies they employed in the process, this study highlights the Jesuits' impact on Chinese linguistic scholarship, the transmission of Christianity, and their role in cross-cultural communication. Their work also exemplifies how language, culture, and religion can effectively collaborate in cross-cultural encounters, shaping historical narratives and fostering dialogue between civilizations.

Keywords: Jesuits; cultural accommodation; linguistics; Chinese; Christianity; cross-cultural exchange



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1. Introduction

From the 16th to the 18th century, Jesuits played a pivotal role in Sino-Western cultural exchange through their exceptional linguistic expertise and cultural adaptation strategies. Recognizing the necessity of integrating into Chinese intellectual circles, they adopted the lifestyle and etiquette of the Confucian elite (Standaert 1999, p. 352) while engaging in rigorous studies of the Chinese language. Language learning became central to their missionary strategy, as they systematically documented Chinese phonetics, script, vocabulary, and grammar by blending Western and Chinese linguistic methodologies (Hsia 2011; Brockey 2007, p. 247). Their linguistic works not only advanced their evangelical mission but also laid the groundwork for China's modernization and cross-cultural dialogue.

Scholarly research on Jesuit linguistic activities spans multiple perspectives. Linguists have examined their contributions to phonetics and phonology (Luo 1930; Tan 2008; Chen and Xu 2023a), lexicography (Masini 1996; Yao 2014, 2015a, 2015b), grammar (Bertuccioli 2003; Paternicò 2017), rhetoric (Zürcher 1996), and Chinese pedagogy (Hsia 2011; Chen

and Xu 2023b; Dong 2024). Their translations and lexical studies have been widely analyzed (Zhu 2008; Li 2012), along with individual contributions such as Joseph de Prémare (1666–1736) (Lundbæk 1991) and Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) (Huang 2003). Jesuits' documentation of Chinese has also been used for historical studies of the language (Yang 1995; Coblin 2000). Historians have explored how their linguistic efforts facilitated missionary work and cultural exchange (Brockey 2007; Mungello 1988, 1994, 2024), while linguistic historiography situates their work in a global context (Bossong 2007; Zwartjes 2012; Dong and Yang 2021; Klöter 2024).

Despite extensive research, little attention has been given to the interplay between Jesuits' cultural adaptation strategies and their linguistic scholarship, as well as their influences. This article addresses the gap by examining how the Jesuits' strategic immersion in Chinese culture and in-depth language studies reinforced each other, shaping their missionary success and fostering Sino-Western intellectual exchange. It first explores their adaptation strategies, then assesses their linguistic contributions, and finally evaluates the broader historical significance of their dual approach.

2. Jesuits' Cultural Accommodation and Linguistic Policies in China

The Jesuits' linguistic activities in China were integral to their missionary strategy, adapting to local conditions to facilitate the transmission of Catholicism. Mastering the Chinese language was central to their policy of cultural accommodation, for it enabled effective communication and fostered trust among Chinese intellectuals. Their dynamic language policies evolved with China's social and political realities to ensure their continued influence.

Recognizing language as key to their mission, the Jesuits approached it with intellectual curiosity (Dorsey 1998, p. 407). Upon arriving in China, they treated the country as an equal to Europe (Wiessala 2014, p. 57), integrating Confucian elements into Christianity and adopting Chinese customs, such as dressing as Confucian scholars (Mungello 1988, p. 15). To overcome language barriers, Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606) established St. Paul Jesuit College in Macau to train missionaries, leading to Michele Ruggieri's (1543–1607) arrival in 1579 and Ricci's in 1582 (Pina 2001). Ricci, known for his adaptability, employed mnemonic techniques to aid Confucian text memorization and other Western linguistic means for language learning (Mungello 2024, p. 18) and bridged European and Chinese traditions (Mungello 1988, p. 44). Another crucial aspect of the Jesuits' strategy was systematizing linguistic knowledge by creating grammars and dictionaries for the Chinese language (Muller 2016, p. 461).

Jesuit linguistic efforts directly supported their missionary goals. Ricci believed Chinese scholars lacked theological knowledge due to linguistic barriers, arguing that their unfamiliarity with European languages hindered their understanding of Christian doctrine (Ricci and Trigault 1983, pp. 103–4). To address this, Jesuits engaged in extensive translation and teaching, making Christian teachings accessible to the Chinese elite. By offering linguistic expertise—such as Western phonetics and phonology, as well as domesticated translation—they positioned themselves as contributors to Chinese intellectual life, fostering goodwill and advancing Catholic ideas.

Beyond missionary work, the Jesuits also made lasting contributions to Chinese linguistics. Their engagement with the Chinese language was a two-way process—both shaping and being shaped by Chinese linguistic traditions. As field linguists, they documented Chinese by using Western linguistic models while drawing from native traditions (Vermander 2022). With no prior European framework for analyzing Chinese, they relied on fieldwork, cultural immersion, and scholarly exchange (Hovdhaugen 1996, p. 14). Their efforts led to the development of Chinese phonology, grammar, rhetoric, and other systems

based on European principles (Mungello 2024, p. 212). Their deep cultural involvement also meant that they adopted local intellectual and social customs, studying classical texts and writing in Chinese. Their success supports the idea that language learners seeking cultural integration achieve greater fluency than those who view language as merely a communication tool (Leahey 1995, p. 113).

3. Jesuits' Linguistic Activities in China

By referring to Western linguistic theories and at the same time accommodating to Chinese linguistic practices, the early Jesuits established the earliest modern descriptive system of the Chinese language, ranging from phonetics/phonology to lexicography, grammar, rhetoric, language teaching, and translation. The Jesuits who returned to China in the mid-19th century, while continuing the early Jesuits' policy of cultural accommodation, were more influenced by emerging Western linguistic theories and professional sinology, integrating modern linguistic frameworks into their research subjects and methods (Mo 2022). Therefore, this article defines the scope of its study within the 16th and 18th centuries.

3.1. Studies of Chinese Phonetics and Phonology

The early Jesuits applied Western phonological knowledge to analyze Chinese phonetics, devising tools to transcribe sounds using the Roman alphabet. Ruggieri pioneered a complete Romanized phonetic system by integrating Western and Chinese phonology. Guided by Chinese teachers, he followed traditional Chinese learning methods and employed philological techniques such as Romanized transcription, Latin glosses, annotations, and textual criticism. This approach enabled him to master Chinese language skills and set a model for later Jesuits. He meticulously studied the phonological classic *Rhymes of the Central Plain* [*Zhongyuan yinyun* 中原音韻]¹, categorizing vowels, consonants, and tones and transcribing them with Roman letters. His system appeared in his Portuguese Chinese dictionary², the first European Chinese dictionary in history (Chen and Xu 2023a).

Building on Ruggieri's work, Ricci refined romanization in *The Miracle of Western Letters* [*Xizi qiji* 西字奇跡] (1605). He received substantial assistance from fellow Jesuit Lazzaro Cattaneo (1560–1640), a musician, and the Chinese brother Sebastião Fernandez 鐘鳴仁 (1562–1621) (Ricci and Trigault 1983; Ricci 2018). Nicolas Trigault (1577–1628) further developed the phonetic transcription by Ricci. Collaborating with Chinese literati like Han Yun 韓雲 (1600–1644) and Wang Zheng 王徵 (1571–1644), Trigault designed an alphabet of 5 vowels, 20 consonants, and 5 tone marks. His system, presented in *An Aid to the Eyes and Ears of Western Literati* [*Xiru ermu zi* 西儒耳目資] (1626), structured Chinese characters by sound, shape, and meaning. It was financed by Zhang Wenda 張問達 (1554–1625), who also contributed a preface alongside Wang Zheng, Han Yun, and Trigault himself. Chinese linguist Luo Changpei 羅常培 commented that *Xiru ermu zi* was refined under the guidance of Chinese scholars, structured according to the principles of Chinese phonology, and made uniform and systematic, thus making it more rigorous and systematic than previous transcriptions (Luo 1951).

Tan's analysis of *Xiru ermu zi* reveals that Trigault's phonological terms and theories largely derived from traditional Chinese scholarship (Tan 2008). His adaptation to Chinese intellectual traditions, aided by Han Yun and Wang Zheng, ensured that his system was more readily accepted than those of other missionaries. The work gained official recognition when it was included in the *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries* [*Siku Quanshu* 四庫全書] during the Qianlong era, significantly contributing to Chinese phonology.

Luo (1930) highlighted the Jesuits' transformative impact on Chinese phonetic analysis, crediting them with three key innovations: (1) using Roman letters to analyze Chinese

phonemes, replacing the complex *fanqie* 反切 system with a simplified method; (2) providing phonetic annotations for Ming-era pronunciation, allowing later scholars to reconstruct historical phonology; and (3) pioneering new approaches in Chinese phonological studies that influenced contemporary linguists.

Subsequent Protestant missionaries, including Robert Morrison (1782–1834), Joseph Edkins (1823–1905), and Samuel Wells Williams (1812–1884), continued to refine Jesuit phonetic systems and promoted the wide use of them. These early efforts influenced later mainstream Romanization schemes, such as the Wade–Giles system and modern Pinyin (Ma 2013). By blending Western methodologies with Chinese intellectual traditions, the Jesuits' phonetic transcriptions marked a revolutionary advancement in Chinese linguistics.

3.2. Studies of Chinese Characters

Before the Jesuits arrived in China, the Western perceptions of Chinese characters were largely shaped by travelers and traders, who viewed them as pictorial symbols rather than phonetic representations. They believed that while spoken dialects varied, the written language provided universal comprehension (Mendoza 1998, pp. 111–12). The Jesuits, however, undertook systematic studies of Chinese characters, memorizing them through structured learning and integrating Western linguistic theories to decipher their system. Their letters and records reveal both the challenges and breakthroughs in this endeavor (Ricci and Trigault 1983; Ricci 2018; Casacchia and Gianninoto 2011).

Ricci combined Western mnemonic techniques with Chinese philology to facilitate character memorization. In *Western Mnemonics* [*Xiguo jifa* 西國記法] (1595), he applied the ancient Greek method of loci, associating characters with vivid imagery. This method, also known as the memory journey or memory palace, involves visualizing a familiar spatial structure (such as a building) and associating information with specific locations within it. For example, two warriors engaged in combat represent the character “武” (*wu*); a woman from a Western tribe represents the character “要” (*yao*); a farmer harvesting crops represents the character “利” (*li*); and a maid holding a baby represents the character “好” (*hao*). In Ricci's view, memory should not rely solely on rote memorization; rather, one should actively engage in the learning process by combining Western mnemonic methods with the structural features of Chinese characters. This book was actually a summary of Ricci's long experience of memorizing Chinese characters, demonstrating how to deconstruct characters based on radicals, pronunciation, and meaning to facilitate understanding (Hsia 2012). However, his methods were primarily useful for foreign learners, while native Chinese scholars found them impractical (Song 2011). In fact, Ricci's goal was broader—by showcasing memory techniques, he sought to impress Chinese intellectuals who were struggling to memorize the Confucian classics and introduce them to Western education, ultimately fostering interest in Christianity.

Unlike Ricci, Prémare sought divine traces in Chinese characters. His *The True Meaning of the Six Types of Characters* [*Liushu shiyi* 六書實義] (1721) used the *liushu* 六書 (six types of Chinese characters) system established by Xu Shen 許慎 (c.58–c.148) and Confucian classics such as *Book of Changes* [*Yijing* 易經] to argue that Christian doctrines were already embedded in Chinese culture. In this book, Prémare explored the origins and functions of the six types of Chinese characters, stating that the creation of writing originated from *Yijing* and that each type of character—*zhishi* 指事 (indicative), *xiangxing* 象形 (pictographic), *xingsheng* 形聲 (phonetic–semantic), *huiyi* 會意 (ideographic), *zhuanzhu* 轉注 (derivative), and *jiajie* 假借 (phonetic loan)—contained divine revelations. He particularly emphasized the indicative category, believing that some simple characters, such as 一 (an ancient form of 主, meaning “master”), 一 (one), 二 (two), 三 (three), 上 (an ancient form of 上 “above”), and 下 (an ancient form of 下 “below”)—represent God, the three

persons of the Holy Trinity, Heaven, Earth, and the Incarnation (Lundbeck 1991, p. 112). Through the meticulous study of *Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters* [*Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字], Prémare proposed that Chinese characters contained divine revelations, aligning with Catholic teachings (Fang 1988; Chen 2017). His work, supported by Chinese Catholic scholar Liu Ning 劉凝 (1620–1715) (see Li 2015), reflected the broader Jesuit accommodation strategy—seeking theological common ground within Chinese culture.

Both Ricci and Prémare employed adaptation as a linguistic strategy but in different ways. Ricci leveraged Western mnemonic techniques to facilitate character learning and impress Chinese scholars, while Prémare used Western exegesis to reinterpret Chinese characters in a Christian framework. Despite their methodological differences, their goal was the same: to enhance the transmission of Christianity in China by engaging with local linguistic traditions.

3.3. Studies of Chinese Terminology

The early Jesuits played a crucial role in translating Western religious and scientific knowledge into Chinese by creating foundational terminology that remains in use today. Figures such as Ruggieri, Ricci, and Giulio Aleni (1582–1649) coined key terms in mathematics, religion, and geography, as seen in works like *Elements of Geometry* [*Jihe yuanben* 幾何原本] (1607) by Ricci and Xu Guangqi 徐光啟 (1562–1633), *Arithmetic Guidance in the Common Language* [*Tongwen suanzhi* 同文算指] (1614) by Ricci and Li Zhizao 李之藻 (1571–1630), and *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* [*Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義] (1605) by Ricci, as well as *A Profile of Western Learning* [*Xixue fan* 西學凡] (1623) and *Record of Foreign Lands* [*Zhifang waiji* 職方外紀] (1623) by Aleni (Dong and Fu 2019).

A key strategy in their translations was cultural accommodation. Ricci, for instance, preferred using existing Chinese terms for Western concepts whenever possible. He translated Deus as *Shangdi* 上帝 (Upper Emperor) or *Tianzhu* 天主 (Heavenly Lord), the Sacred Scripture as *Shengjing* 聖經, and the Virgin Mary as *Shengmu* 聖母, all terms rooted in classical Chinese texts (ibid). This approach facilitated acceptance while subtly replacing original meanings with new Christian meaning—a phenomenon termed “semantic occupation” by Huang Heqing (Huang 2003). However, Ricci’s ultimate goal was not mere adaptation but the gradual replacement of Chinese religious concepts with Christian doctrine (Esguerra 2015, p. 57). His strategy did work, for today, very few Chinese people would recognize these terms as original non-Christian native words.

In natural sciences, Jesuits similarly adapted terminology to align with Chinese linguistic structures. Terms like *Beiji* 北極 (North Pole) and *Nanji* 南極 (South Pole) were redefined within scientific contexts, while *jingxian* 經線 (longitude) and *weixian* 緯線 (latitude) were borrowed from weaving terminology. However, the structural limitations of early modern Chinese posed challenges. Since it was predominantly monosyllabic, translating Western technical terms with single-character words risked ambiguity. To resolve this, Ricci and his peers introduced disyllabic and trisyllabic terms, which marked the beginning of Chinese’s transition to modern linguistic structures. In the 12 Chinese works he translated between 1595 and 1610, most of the terms he created were disyllabic or trisyllabic (Huang 2003; Dong and Fu 2019). This shift paralleled earlier Buddhist translations but gained momentum with the Jesuits’ systematic approach. In Wang Li’s opinion, the Jesuits and their Western successors exerted much more important influences than the Buddhist translators (Wang 2004, p. 679). Shen (2013) noted that this development influenced not only vocabulary but also grammar and style, laying the foundation for modern Chinese.

Ricci also utilized a productive word formation strategy by using the “modifier + headword” structure (or “differentia + genus” format). Based on *xian* 線 (line), he created *gexian* 割線 (secant line), *qiexian* 切線 (tangent line), *zhixian* 直線 (straight line), *quxian* 曲線 (curve),

xuxian 虛線 (dotted line), *ziwuxian* 子午線 (meridian), and *dipingxian* 地平線 (horizon). This method enhanced precision and became widely adopted, fostering a shift toward affixation and logical structuring in Chinese vocabulary (Dong and Fu 2019). This syntactic transformation contributed to a more Europeanized grammatical structure, increasing clarity and expressiveness in technical discourse.

The Jesuits' adaptive linguistic strategies—semantic accommodation, structured terminology creation, and polysyllabic adaptation—allowed them to bridge Western and Chinese intellectual traditions. While their work facilitated cross-cultural communication, it also subtly reshaped the Chinese linguistic landscape and influenced its modern evolution. This viewpoint has been supported by many scholars (such as Gao 2009; Xu 2011; Yuan 2016); however, further empirical research based on historical corpora is needed to continue exploring the extent of this influence.

3.4. Studies of Chinese Grammar

Western studies of Chinese grammar began with missionaries, with early efforts by the Spanish Dominican Melchior de Mançano (c. 1579–c. 1630) in c. 1620³ and the Italian Jesuit Martino Martini (1614–1661). Martini's *Grammatica Linguae Sinensis* (1653), the first extant Mandarin grammar book, structured Chinese within a Latin-based framework. It categorized words by function, describing pronouns, tenses, and moods while noting that Chinese lacked inflectional morphology. His work influenced European perceptions of Chinese grammar, yet it also reflected the Jesuits' adaptive approach—highlighting Chinese linguistic structures rather than rigidly imposing Latin models (Bertuccioli 2003; Paternicò 2017; Chappell and Peyraube 2014).

Martini's grammar, though concise and initially a personal reference, spread among European scholars and inspired debates on the Chinese language. By focusing on Mandarin, the lingua franca of the literati, the Jesuits aligned their linguistic policy with Chinese intellectual elites. Martini's outline included phonetics, syntax, and basic grammatical functions, emphasizing how words shifted roles based on sentence structure rather than fixed conjugations. His work, later edited and published in *Museum Sinicum* (Bayer 1730) by Theophilus Siegfried Bayer (1694–1738), helped integrate Chinese grammar into European linguistic studies, making the Chinese language one of the most important issues in the European cultural debate of that time (Paternicò 2017).

A more comprehensive Jesuit grammar was that in *Notitia Linguae Sinicae* (Prémare [1728] 1831). Unlike Martini's brief grammar, Prémare's work was a full linguistic and literary study, distinguishing between spoken and written Chinese—an innovative approach for his time. The first part focused on Mandarin grammar, function words, and rhetoric, while the second part analyzed written Chinese syntax, literary styles, and rhetoric. His emphasis on function words and syntax over rigid grammatical rules reflected an adaptive strategy, mirroring Chinese linguistic principles rather than imposing Western grammatical models (Lundboek 1991, p. 75).

Prémare's grammar featured extensive examples rather than abstract rules, drawing from Yuan dynasty plays, vernacular novels, and classical literature. He categorized Chinese pronouns, tones, and particles, arguing that function words were key to understanding Chinese. This method helped learners internalize syntax through usage rather than formal rules. However, European scholars who preferred more systematic rule-based approaches criticized the lack of explicit grammatical structures (Abél-Rémusat 1822, pp. ix–x; Summers 1863, p. vii). Despite this, Prémare's insights deeply influenced later sinologists, including Georg von der Gabelentz (1840–1893) (author of an influential Chinese grammar book (Gabelentz 1881)) and Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832), who recognized his unparalleled grasp of the Chinese linguistic system.

Both Martini and Prémare exemplified the Jesuits' adaptive linguistic strategies. Martini's grammar, though Latin-influenced, highlighted structural aspects unique to Chinese. Prémare's work went further, distinguishing spoken from written forms and prioritizing functional adaptation over direct translation. He believed that through the study of ancient Chinese texts, he could trace the elements of Christianity within classics, better approach the Chinese people, and convert the faith of the nation. Both grammars reflected the Jesuits' broader mission: engaging with Chinese intellectual traditions while subtly shaping linguistic discourse to facilitate cross-cultural exchange and religious conversion. This adaptation strategy not only bridged Western and Chinese linguistic frameworks but also contributed to the development of modern Chinese linguistic studies (Lundbæk 1991, pp. 19–20; Xiao 2012).

3.5. Studies of Rhetoric

The Jesuits, beginning with Ricci, engaged in cross-cultural rhetorical practices through strategic adaptation. Initially referring to themselves as Western monks, they later rebranded as Western Confucian scholars to align with Chinese intellectual traditions. This rhetorical adaptation facilitated their integration into Chinese scholarly circles. Ricci's *Xiguo jifa* and *On Friendship* [*Jiaoyou lun* 交友論] (1595) exemplify this strategy, as both works adapted classical Western rhetorical principles for a Chinese audience (Li 2012, p. 268).

Aleni's *Xixue fan* further advanced this adaptation by systematically introducing Western rhetorical theory. He outlined four components of Western rhetoric—teachings of ancient sages, historical records, poetic and prose forms, and argumentative essays—demonstrating how Jesuits framed their knowledge to resonate with Chinese scholars (Aleni 2012). To bridge the rhetorical gap, the Jesuits translated and adapted Western metaphors, allegories, and maxims, aligning them with traditional Chinese moral instruction, seeking to establish an image of themselves as well-educated, morally upright, and wise figures (Zürcher 1996). Jesuit works such as Ricci's *Jiaoyou lun* and *Twenty-five Sayings* [*Ershiwu yan* 二十五言] (1605) became widely regarded as foreign *shanshu* 善書 (edifying books).

A landmark in Jesuit rhetorical adaptation was *Art of Comparison* [*Pixue* 譬學] (1633) by Alfonso Vagnoni (1566–1640), the first systematic introduction of Western rhetorical thought in China. Vagnoni collaborated extensively with Chinese scholars to ensure cultural alignment. It was proofread by Duan Gun 段袞 (n. et m. ignoti) and refined by the prestigious scholar official Xu Guangqi. Throughout the writing process, Vagnoni engaged in extensive discussions with Chinese scholars in Jiangzhou 絳州 of Shanxi Province, making the book a product of close Sino-Western collaboration. The work contained nearly 700 proverbial aphorisms and parables, drawing from sources such as Aristotelian philosophy, Erasmus, Plutarch, the Bible, and Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* (see Zhou 2013, p. 510; Jin 2015, pp. 82–84). Through this synthesis of Chinese and Western traditions, *Pixue* became a product of mutual cultural adaptation, fostering successful Sino-Western intellectual exchange.

The classification of parables in *Pixue* closely corresponded to rhetorical categories in *The Rules of Writing* [*Wenze* 文則] (1170)⁴ by Chen Kui 陳騏 (1128–1203), reflecting Vagnoni's deep engagement with Chinese literary traditions and his effort to integrate Western and Chinese rhetorical thoughts (Li 2012, p. 288). The work gained significant readership and even inspired imitation, such as Han Lin's 韓霖 (1596–1649) *Book of the Bell* [*Duoshu* 鐸書] (1641), which blended Jesuit rhetorical strategies with Confucian moral teachings. This fusion of traditions exemplifies the *in-between culture* phenomenon described by Standaert (2002, pp. 39–47), where both Jesuits and Chinese literati actively contributed to a hybrid

cultural space. By aligning their rhetoric with Chinese traditions, the Jesuits gained credibility among Chinese scholars, allowing for deeper intellectual and religious engagement. This strategic accommodation not only facilitated cross-cultural dialogue but also left a lasting impact on Chinese rhetorical and literary traditions.

3.6. Endeavors in Learning and Teaching of Chinese

The Jesuits' approach to learning and teaching the Chinese language reflected a synthesis of Chinese and Western educational traditions. The earliest recorded efforts in Jesuit Chinese language education began with Ruggieri, who primarily studied written Chinese by using the Four Books and traditional elementary textbooks such as the *Thousand Character Classic* [*Qian zi wen* 千字文] and the *Three-Character Classic* [*San zi jing* 三字經] (Chen and Xu 2023b). Later Jesuits followed Ruggieri's methodology by using local elementary textbooks, employing local teachers for daily lessons, and incorporating Ruggieri's previously written Chinese language materials. This practice of beginning with elementary readers and progressing to the Four Books and Five Classics became a cornerstone of Jesuit Chinese language education. Ruggieri was likely the first to attempt a Latin translation of the Four Books, a project later continued by Ricci, whose Latin paraphrase and commentary on the texts served as instructional materials for newly arrived Jesuits (Mungello 1988, p. 59). As the foundational texts of official Chinese culture, the Four Books also played a crucial role in Ricci's Confucian–Christian synthesis (Mungello 1988, p. 17).

To facilitate their language learning, the Jesuits hired a variety of instructors, including interpreters from Macau, unsuccessful imperial examination candidates, and baptized local Christians. While traveling to Beijing for the second time in 1600, Ricci even enlisted a young eunuch as his oral language instructor. Catholic converts from Macau also served as Ricci's assistants, providing invaluable support in his linguistic endeavors (Hsia 2012, pp. 128–46). Beyond formal instruction, Jesuits established close relationships with Chinese scholars, humbly seeking their guidance and benefiting from their knowledge of the language and culture.

The Jesuits adopted an immersive learning approach, living among the Chinese and engaging deeply with their cultural and intellectual traditions. They learned characters in the same manner as Chinese children, practiced Mandarin pronunciation, memorized and translated Confucian classics, and attended lectures by Chinese teachers (Brockey 2007, pp. 243–55). Under the leadership of Ruggieri and Ricci, the early Jesuits developed a structured language-learning model: experienced senior missionaries trained newcomers with the assistance of Chinese aides, following a curriculum modeled after Confucian education. This curriculum began with the simplest readers before progressing to the Four Books and Five Classics, with a strong emphasis on written Chinese. Spoken language instruction focused on Mandarin, and translation exercises formed a key component of the learning process (Hsia 2011). However, this flexible, decentralized approach required high levels of commitment and was not suitable for large-scale and efficient language instruction for new Jesuit arrivals.

Recognizing the need for a standardized curriculum, Manuel Dias Jr. (1574–1659), who had served as a rector of St. Paul's College in Macau, led an effort between 1622 and 1624 to develop a structured Chinese language education plan. This initiative resulted in a version of the *Ratio Studiorum* especially for Chinese teaching, which sought to replace fragmented, self-directed learning with an organized curriculum. Recently rediscovered in the *Jesuitas na Ásia* archival collection at the Biblioteca da Ajuda in Portugal, this document, titled "Ratio Studiorum para os Nossos que ham de Estudar as Letras e Lingua da China" (Educational Plan for Our Members Who Must Study the Letters and Language of China), provided guidelines on academic structure, curriculum content, teaching meth-

ods, and instructor qualifications (Brockey 2007, pp. 255–63). The plan aimed to produce learned Jesuits in the model of Ricci, capable of engaging with Chinese scholars and officials. Learners were expected to emulate Jiangnan 江南 intellectuals in both demeanor and behavior, undergoing a four-year structured learning process guided by both European missionaries and Chinese scholars, with a strong emphasis on cultural sensitivity.

The prescribed teaching materials included records of earlier Jesuits' language-learning experiences, as well as Confucian primers like the *Qian zi wen* and core Confucian texts. Beyond linguistic training, students also studied Chinese etiquette, such as conversational customs, table manners, and grooming practices, in an effort to integrate seamlessly into Chinese intellectual circles. Teaching methods combined European Jesuit pedagogical techniques—such as text explanation, recitation, composition, imitation, translation, and full immersion—with traditional Chinese methods, including character writing drills and Confucian classic interpretation (ibid).

Despite its ambitions, the Chinese *Ratio Studiorum* was not widely implemented as intended. However, many linguistic works produced by the Jesuits emerged as byproducts of this educational effort. The Jesuits' language-learning process also contributed significantly to the transmission of Chinese culture to the West and the reception of Christianity in China (Dong 2024). Rather than imposing a Western framework, they immersed themselves in the traditional Confucian educational system, modeling their curriculum on the classical Chinese learning process. This approach exemplifies their remarkable adaptability and commitment to cultural integration.

3.7. Jesuits' Translation Activities in China

Upon their arrival in China, Jesuit missionaries explored various methods of evangelization but quickly recognized that direct preaching was largely ineffective. Instead, they found that cultural adaptation and intellectual exchange provided a more effective path to gaining acceptance among both the Chinese scholarly elite and the broader society. Consequently, many Jesuits integrated translation as a core missionary strategy, making it a central part of their work. Through their translations of Western knowledge, Jesuits earned the recognition of Chinese scholars and even the imperial court, thus facilitating Christianity's entry into China. These translation efforts significantly influenced China's scientific and cultural development, as well as its linguistic and literary traditions. Liang (2001, p. 8) described this period as the second great convergence of Chinese and foreign knowledge following the introduction of Buddhism into Chinese culture, while Wang Li pointed out that the impact of the translation movement initiated by the Jesuits on the Chinese lexical system far exceeded that of Buddhist translations (Wang 2004, p. 679). At the same time, Jesuits also translated Chinese works into European languages, fostering the growth of sinology in the West and shaping European intellectual thoughts.

Xu Zongze's *A Summary of Jesuit Translations During the Ming and Qing Dynasties* (Xu 1989) records more than 200 Jesuit translations into Chinese. Ma (2004, pp. 267–304) categorizes these works into nine key disciplines: astronomy and mathematics; physics and mechanical engineering; mining and metallurgy; military technology; physiology and medicine; biology; geography; linguistics and literature; and scholastic philosophy and religion. In these fields, Jesuits collaborated with Chinese scholars to translate foundational Western academic theories into Chinese. Their efforts expanded Chinese intellectual horizons, challenged long-held perceptions of China as the "Heavenly Kingdom" and the center of the world, and encouraged a more balanced and critical engagement with both Chinese and Western cultures.

In translating Christian texts, the Jesuits did not produce a complete Bible in Chinese, but they introduced and explained key doctrines and scriptural passages. They deliber-

ately adapted Christian concepts to align with Chinese linguistic and cultural traditions, using familiar terminology to facilitate comprehension. Furthermore, they translated European sermons, parables, and collections of moral wisdom into Chinese, structuring them in ways that resembled traditional Chinese moral texts and aphorisms, thereby making them more acceptable to Chinese scholars. A notable example of this approach is Prémare's Chinese translation of *The Biography of St. Joseph* [Shengmu jingpei shengruose zhuan 聖母淨配聖若瑟傳] (1708)⁵. By likening St. Joseph to Zhu Sheng Niang Niang 注生娘娘, a deity associated with fertility, Prémare aligned Christian teachings with the Confucian ideals of family and lineage. He also drew upon *Yuanqu* 元曲 scripts and popular novels like *Water Margin* [Shuihu zhuan 水滸傳], employing vernacular storytelling techniques such as poetic couplet chapter headings and unfinished narratives, reflecting the *huaben* 話本 oral storytelling tradition. This method made Christian teachings more culturally accessible, illustrating the Figurists' broader strategy of embedding Christian narratives within familiar literary and ideological frameworks to encourage conversion (Wei 2018).

While introducing Western knowledge to China, Jesuits also worked extensively to make Chinese civilization known in the West. They translated key Confucian texts, including the Four Books and Five Classics, allowing Europeans to engage with Chinese philosophy and governance systems. Additionally, Chinese achievements in drama, medicine, history, culture, and science were widely translated, broadening the intellectual horizons of European scholars and providing valuable resources for Western scientists (see Ma 2004; Xie 2009; Wang et al. 1999, p. 57). Joseph Needham further emphasized that Jesuit translations of Chinese texts played a crucial role in transmitting the Confucian ideals of innate human goodness to Europe, contributing to the intellectual progress of the Enlightenment (Needham 1990, p. 123).

The translation activities of the Jesuits may not appear to be linguistic research in the strictest sense. However, their creation of new terms, logically rigorous syntactic structures, and novel rhetorical techniques in the translated works had a profound impact on the Chinese language and linguistic cognition of Chinese intellectuals. Empirical investigations into these influences will form a new research topic. Moreover, their efforts to translate Chinese knowledge into Western languages not only introduced Chinese wisdom to Westerners but also familiarized them with the typological characteristics of the Chinese language and the heritage of Chinese linguistics, indirectly contributing to the development of modern Western linguistics. These aspects constitute the linguistic significance of discussing the Jesuits' translation activities.

3.8. Summary

The early Jesuits' linguistic activities in China played a pioneering role in the development of modern Chinese linguistics by integrating Western linguistic theories with Chinese traditions. Their contributions spanned phonetics, lexicography, grammar, rhetoric, translation, and language teaching. Early Jesuits such as Ruggieri and Ricci developed Romanized transcription systems, setting a foundation for later phonetic studies, while Trigault's *Xiru ermu zi* refined phonological analysis under the guidance of Chinese scholars. These efforts not only simplified the fanqie 反切 system but also influenced later Romanization schemes, including Pinyin.

In studying Chinese characters, Ricci employed mnemonic techniques to aid memorization, while Prémare sought theological connections within Chinese script. Their work highlighted both practical and ideological strategies, facilitating the Jesuits' broader mission of cultural accommodation and religious transmission. Similarly, their translation endeavors introduced key Western scientific and religious concepts into Chinese, shaping intellectual exchanges. By strategically adapting terminology and rhetorical techniques,

Jesuits bridged linguistic and cultural divides, influencing both Chinese scholarship and European sinology.

The Jesuits also established structured language-learning methods, relying on Confucian education models and immersive learning strategies. The development of a *Ratio Studiorum* for Chinese language studies reflected their commitment to formalized instruction. Additionally, their studies of Chinese grammar, as seen in Martini's and Prémare's works, provided early frameworks for the European understanding of Chinese syntax. Their rhetorical adaptation further enhanced their acceptance within Chinese intellectual circles, exemplified by works like Vagnoni's *Pixue*. Overall, the Jesuits' linguistic legacy laid the groundwork for cross-cultural scholarly exchanges, the modernization of Chinese linguistics, and the transmission of Christianity in China.

4. Conclusions

The Jesuits' linguistic endeavors in China were not merely an academic exercise but an integral component of their broader missionary strategy. From the very beginning, the Jesuits realized that China possesses a splendid civilization that is in no way inferior to that of Europe, so a genuine respect and admiration for the Chinese culture was necessary if they wanted to approach the Chinese people. Moreover, a "bottom-up" strategy focusing on the language and culture of the common people as they practiced in other parts of the world would not work here, either (Klöter 2011, pp. 38–42). Therefore, the Jesuits accommodated the language and culture of the Confucian literati (Standaert 1999, p. 352), especially emphasizing the importance of Chinese language learning as a key to the ancient civilization.

Their deep engagement with the Chinese language was both a means of religious transmission and an adaptation policy designed to foster cross-cultural exchange. By systematically studying Chinese phonetics/phonology, grammar, lexicography, rhetoric, and literature, the Jesuits developed linguistic frameworks that allowed for a more effective presentation of Christian doctrine in a culturally comprehensible manner. Their linguistic activities exemplified a dual approach: they not only introduced Western linguistic principles into the study of Chinese but also reinterpreted Chinese linguistic traditions in a way that aligned with Christian teachings.

The adaptation strategy adopted by the Jesuits was crucial to their missionary success. Recognizing that direct evangelization would be met with resistance, they chose instead to integrate themselves into Chinese intellectual circles by mastering the Confucian classics, adopting the manners of literati, and employing rhetorical techniques familiar to their audience. This strategic accommodation allowed them to build credibility and engage in meaningful theological discourse with Chinese scholars. By employing Western linguistic techniques, transliterating phonetics, and developing new terminology, they bridged linguistic gaps and facilitated dialogue between Chinese and European intellectual traditions. Their efforts in translation, particularly the adaptation of Christian concepts into Chinese, further illustrate their nuanced approach to cultural integration. Rather than imposing foreign theological frameworks, they carefully selected existing Chinese terms and concepts to articulate Christian beliefs, thereby enhancing their acceptance within the local cultural landscape.

Beyond their immediate missionary goals, the Jesuits' linguistic contributions had lasting implications for both Chinese and Western scholarship. Their phonetic transcriptions and grammatical analyses provided foundational insights that influenced later linguistic studies. Their Chinese linguistic studies and translations of Chinese classics into European languages played a pivotal role in shaping the Western perceptions of China and the development of European science and humanity thoughts. Their meticulous documentation of

Chinese linguistic structures also provided future scholars with essential tools for studying the evolution of the language.

However, the Jesuits' accommodation strategy was not without controversy. While their linguistic and cultural integration facilitated the dissemination of Christian teachings, it also raised theological debates within the Catholic Church, particularly concerning the extent to which Confucian practices could be reconciled with Christian doctrine. The Chinese Rites Controversy, which questioned the legitimacy of Jesuit adaptations, with a linguistic issue (the translation of Deus as 天主 Tiānzhǔ or 天 Tiān/上帝 Shàngdì, the latter being the result of the cultural adaptation of the Jesuits) as the first point of contention, ultimately led to a decline in their influence and, by the 18th century, contributed to the suppression of their missionary activities in China. This historical episode underscores the delicate balance between cultural accommodation and doctrinal purity—a challenge that continues to be relevant in cross-cultural religious engagements today.

In conclusion, the Jesuits' linguistic efforts in China exemplify the power of language in mediating cultures and beliefs. In the preface to the reprint of Ricci's *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* [*Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義] (1603), the famous Confucius scholar Li Zhizao wrote "Across the seas of the East and the West the mind and reasoning are the same. The difference lies only in the language and the writing" (東海西海, 心同理同。所不同者, 特言語文字之際。) (Li 1989). Through strategic linguistic activities, the Jesuits could communicate differences in the language and reach the identification of mind and reasoning, eventually leading to the integration of Christianity and Confucianism. The Jesuits' meticulous studies of Chinese linguistics were instrumental in advancing their missionary objectives while simultaneously fostering intellectual exchanges between China and the West. The legacy of their linguistic endeavors extends far beyond their immediate missionary context, influencing the development of modern Chinese linguistic studies and contributing to the broader history of global cultural exchange. Their adaptation policy illustrates how linguistic and cultural sensitivity can bridge even the most profound intellectual and theological divides and remains a valuable model for cross-cultural dialogue today.

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Notes

¹ *Rhymes of the Central Plain* 中原音韻 is a rime book from the Yuan dynasty compiled by Zhou Deqing 周德清 in 1324. It is an important work for the study of historical Chinese phonology, testifying to phonological changes from Middle Chinese to Old Mandarin.

² (Witek 2001), as for the authorship of this work, there are still controversies regarding whether Ruggieri compiled it alone or coauthored it with Ricci, or there could have been other authors.

- ³ Dominican Melchior de Mançano wrote the first grammar rules for any Chinese dialect: *Arte de la lengua Chiō Chiu* (Grammar of the Chiō Chiu Language), dated 1620–1621. Henning Klöter published a transcript and annotated translation of the manuscript: (Klöter 2011).
- ⁴ The book was first printed in 1170. A reprinted version can be seen in (Chen and Li 2016).
- ⁵ Joseph Henri de Prémare. *The Biography of St. Joseph* [*Shengmu jingpei shenggruouse zhuan* 聖母淨配聖若瑟傳]. Printed in 1708. Reprinted by Zhang Xiping, et al., and included in (Zhang et al. 2014).

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