

Article

The Interaction and Clash of Ideas between Matteo Ricci and the Taizhou School

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Abstract: This article explores the interactions between the Taizhou school and Jesuit missionaries during the late Ming dynasty. It reveals the intellectual exchanges between these influential groups in fields such as philosophy and religion and their significance in spreading Western knowledge to the East. The article begins by introducing the complete process of exchanges between Taizhou school representatives like Jiao Hong, Li Zhi, Zhu Shilu, Tang Xianzu, Xu Guangqi, and Jesuit missionaries including Matteo Ricci. It delves into how these interactions influenced the development of their respective thoughts and academic theories. The exchange between the two groups was not a perfect fusion and was filled with contradictions, conflicts, and struggles, particularly on issues such as human nature and cosmology. By studying this process of exchange, we can understand how the intellectual elite of late Ming China accepted and reflected upon Western thought. It also reveals how Western intellectuals used this exchange to comprehend and appreciate Chinese philosophy and culture.

Keywords: Matteo Ricci; Jiao Hong; Li Zhi; Taizhou School; Sino–Western cultural exchange

1. Preface

When editing *Tian Zhu Shi Yi* (《天主实义》), Andrew Chung wrote: “The dialogue between Catholicism and native Chinese philosophy and religious thought that took place in China during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties was unparalleled in terms of its duration, scale, range of issues addressed, intensity of debate, and profound impact. This is unprecedented in Chinese culture, academic studies, and religious thought. In the history of human thought and culture, it is also magnificent. Even in the broader history of human intellectual and cultural development up to the present day, it stands as a remarkable spectacle” (Chung 2003). Dai Guoqing and Lin Jinshui’s “Thirty Years of Matteo Ricci Research” summarises the research on Matteo Ricci and other Jesuit missionaries in China since the reform and opening. They point out the characteristics of the research on Ricci—a detailed examination of every aspect of his activities in China, and an interdisciplinary and multi-faceted look at Ricci and other Jesuit missionaries in the late Ming period. They also describe some recent achievements in research on Ricci, including the compilation and organisation of Ricci’s Chinese writings, comparative studies of Ricci and Confucianism, and comparative research on Chinese and Western theological and philosophical exchanges (Dai and Lin 2010).

Zhu Weizheng first noticed the similarities between Matteo Ricci’s journey to the north and the route of Wang Yangming’s teachings a hundred years earlier. In “Wang Yangming’s Philosophy in Late Ming and Matteo Ricci’s Entry into China” (W. Zhu 2004), he pointed out that Ricci received support from followers of Wang Yangming at crucial moments and explained why Ricci won the favour of these scholars. Huang Wenshu discussed the interactions between Jiao Hong, Zhu Shilu, and Li Zhi, three representatives of the Taizhou School, with Matteo Ricci in “The Association between the Yangming School and Matteo Ricci and Its Implications” (Huang 2009). However, he did not cite any writings from Jiao Hong or Zhu Shilu to illustrate their specific attitudes towards Ricci. Xiao



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Lang holds a similar view in “Matteo Ricci and the Bailudong Academy and Others” (Xiao 2007). Based on the historical interactions between Ricci and the teachers and students of the Bailudong Academy led by Zhang Yanghao, Xiao pointed out that “Ricci’s time in Nanchang was, in fact, one of the key points for the eastward spread of Western learning during the transition from the late Ming to the early Qing dynasty”. Chen Weiping’s article, “The Support of Wang Yangming’s Philosophy for Western Learning at the Turn of the Ming and Qing Dynasties and Its Significance” (W. Chen 2016), argues that the popularity of Wang Yangming’s philosophy of the mind in the late Ming period challenged the authoritative position of the Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism since the Song dynasty. This activated scholars’ independent spirit of questioning and reflection, making them more receptive to new ideas and theories. At the same time, the fragmentation and disputes among Confucian factions meant that there was no longer an authoritative voice in the realm of thought. The Catholic theological system, which incorporated elements of both Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism and Wang Yangming’s philosophy, was welcomed and propagated by some scholars because it helped rebuild the theoretical foundation of the Confucian system.

The Taizhou School, as an essential component of Wang Yangming’s teachings, advocated the principle that “the daily life of the common people is the Way”. This has certain commonalities with the foundational principle of the Catholic faith that Matteo Ricci believed in, which is the “universalism of the common good”. Interactions between members of the Taizhou School and Ricci are often mentioned. In addition to works such as *The Jesuits and the History of Catholicism Entering China* (Ricci 2014), *Matteo Ricci: The Jesuit in the Forbidden City* (Hsia 2020), *Jesuits Entering China and the Confluence of Chinese and Western Cultures during the Ming and Qing Dynasties* (Gernet and Demiéville 2011), *From Matteo Ricci to Johann Adam Schall von Bell: Jesuit Missionaries in Late Ming* (Dunne 2003), *Matteo Ricci and Xu Guangqi* (Sun 2009), and *History of Early Intellectual Exchanges between China and Europe*, there are also compilations like *The Letters of Matteo Ricci* (Ricci 2018) and *Matteo Ricci: Compilation of Chinese Documents from the Ming and Qing Dynasties* (K. Tang 2017). Numerous academic papers have discussed related topics. Li Yuwei’s article “A Study of Laymen Groups in Late Ming” (Y. Li 2013) describes the interactions between “laymen” (those among the scholar-official class who upheld Buddhist teachings and studied classics) of the late Ming period and Jesuit missionaries. The article provides a detailed discussion of the interactions and methods of communication between representative figures of the laypeople group, such as Jiao Hong and Li Zhi, and Matteo Ricci, a representative Jesuit in China. The cultural significance of these interactions is affirmed in Wu Bin’s article “The Circle of Friends of Matteo Ricci” (Wu 2022), which recounts Ricci’s interactions with members of the Ming royal family and renowned scholars and intellectuals in China, provides a detailed reflection of Ricci’s activities in China. Wu Qing and Chen Wenyuan’s article “A Brief Account of the Interactions between Ming Dynasty Scholar Zhu Shilu and Matteo Ricci” (Wu and Chen 2005) examines the relationship between Zhu Shilu and Ricci.

The interactions between Li Zhi and Matteo Ricci have received widespread attention in the academic community. Zhu Weizheng’s “Matteo Ricci and Li Zhuowu” (W. Zhu 2001), Liu Yuelian’s “Li Zhuowu and Ricci: A Meeting of Chinese and Western Thinkers during the Wanli Period” (Y. Liu 2002), and Chen Dubin’s “A Unique Collision of Late Chinese and Western Cultures: When Li Zhi Met Matteo Ricci” (D. Chen 2020) focus on the interactions between the renowned late Ming thinker Li Zhi and Matteo Ricci. These works provide detailed accounts of their interactions and their impressions of each other. Chen Enwei’s “Friendship between Li Zhi and Matteo Ricci and the Mutual Examination of Chinese and Western Philosophies in the Late Ming” (E. Chen 2022) describes the interactions between Li Zhi and Ricci. It analyses the similarities in their theories of friendship and their differences, such as the cultural traditions in which their philosophies of friendship are rooted and the intensity of their conflicts with orthodox Confucianism. Similar to this is Liu Huayun’s “On Matteo Ricci’s Concept of Friendship: Focusing on ‘On Friendship’” (H. Liu 2012), which, through an analysis of Ricci’s philosophy of friendship, points out

that Ricci made certain modifications to his philosophy of friendship to adapt to Confucian thought for missionary purposes. It also discusses the convergence of Ricci's philosophy of friendship with the friendship theories of the late Ming period. Xu Sumin's "Li Zhi and Western Learning" (Xu 2016) argues that Li Zhi's later thoughts were a response to the introduction of Western learning into China. Some of his ideas attempted to Sinicize Christianity and expand on Ricci's teachings. This work offers an innovative perspective on the influence of Western learning on the thought system of the Chinese scholar-official class during the late Ming period.

There has been a significant amount of research conducted on the relationship between Jesuit missionaries, such as Matteo Ricci, and members of the Taizhou School. However, most of the studies conducted so far have focused on the relationship between Wang Yangming's philosophy (Wangxue) and Ricci, or the relationship between Li Zhi and Ricci. What is missing from this research is a comprehensive examination of the relationship between Ricci and members of the Taizhou School who opposed the constraints on human nature and challenged the authoritative position of Cheng-Zhu Confucianism. The Taizhou School, which led the intellectual liberation movement of the late Ming dynasty, emphasised the unity of the three religions (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism). This opposing ideology to the Jesuit missionaries, who promoted Confucianism and suppressed Buddhism, has not been adequately highlighted in the existing literature. Furthermore, the current research does not provide a complete description of the political choices made by Jesuit missionaries, led by Ricci, in the turbulent environment of the late Ming dynasty. To achieve their missionary goals, they sought the protection of the ruling elites by aligning themselves with the Donglin faction while distancing themselves from the Taizhou School. Therefore, in this article, we aim to narrate the interactions between Matteo Ricci and members of the Taizhou School and analyse the resulting ideological clashes.

2. Matteo Ricci and the Jesuits' Arrival in China

After the Ming dynasty defeated the Yuan dynasty, the Franciscan missionaries in China left one after another, and the original Khanbalik (Beijing) and Chitong (Quanzhou) dioceses ceased to exist. The Portuguese and Spaniards arrived in Asia by opening new sea routes. With the support of the Roman Curia and the Portuguese court, Catholicism re-entered China. By this time, the Jesuits, who had become the core force of the "Catholic Reformation", turned their attention to the East. The death of Francis Xavier (1506–1552) on Shangchuan Island did not diminish the Jesuits' passion for evangelism. After completing their studies at the Roman College, batch after batch of young Jesuits were sent to Portugal. After swearing allegiance to the Portuguese king, they boarded Portuguese ships and arrived in Macau. According to statistics by the French Jesuit Joseph Dehergne (1903–1990), 975 Jesuits entered China during Portuguese Padroado (Dehergne 1973).

At that time, Europe was undergoing a massive transition from the Middle Ages to the modern era. The "Christendom" system centred on the Catholic Church, *Respublica Christiana*, which was headed towards collapse with Rome's fall in 1527. The rise of the Protestant Reformation forced the Catholic Church to embark on a profound reform. To emphasise its "self-awareness", the Catholic Church termed this the "Catholic Reformation". This reform had two landmark events: the convening of the Council of Trent and the establishment of the Society of Jesus by Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) and Francis Xavier. On one hand, the Jesuits swore allegiance to the Pope in Rome; on the other, they sought to become advisers to the secular monarchs of Europe, defending the status of Catholicism. With the opening of new sea routes, the Jesuits dedicated themselves to missionary work outside of Europe, striving to make Catholicism a genuinely global religion (Qi 2007, p. 75).

The missionary impulse of the Jesuits meant that they naturally pursued the goal of universally converting all of humanity to the Catholic faith. What stands out in the global missionary practices of the Jesuits is their controversial "accommodation" method that, in "contexts", took the form of what we today call "cultural integration". To some extent, Alessandro Valignano's method of accommodation foreshadowed a globalisation variant

that rejected a one-way Westernization and was open to cross-cultural encounters and mutual learning processes. In analysing historian and Jesuit Antoni Ucerler, it is noteworthy to emphasise that “cultural accommodation” was not merely a method invented by European Jesuits to enhance their “missionary” efficiency. Instead, it was inspired by their Japanese and Chinese interlocutors, especially the lay believers, who often demanded that the Jesuits engage with them on the terms of local culture. Matteo Ricci was a practitioner of “cultural accommodation”, adopting the Confucian “habitus” to enhance his cultural influence, further masking his true missionary intent (Casanova 2015, p. 31).

Ricci held the literature and politics of the Ming dynasty in high esteem, but he scorned China’s religion. According to a letter Ricci wrote to Fornari on 13 February 1583, “The Chinese worship various idols. When the idols fail to fulfil their wishes, the Chinese will beat them. They worship or respect the devil in this way to avoid harm from the devil” (Hsia 2020, p. 79). Not long after Ricci started learning Chinese in Macau, the prefect of Zhaoqing (肇庆), Wang Pan, issued a pass, allowing Ruggieri and Ricci to go to Zhaoqing (Hsia 2020, p. 88).

During his more than ten years in Guangdong, Matteo Ricci was constantly thinking about how to evangelise, and at this time, they often adopted the guise of Buddhist “Western monks” (西僧). In 1592, Tang Xianzu (汤显祖) had interactions with Matteo Ricci and Francesco de Petris in Duanzhou (端州). Like the proud and unrestrained Li Zhi (李贽), Tang Xianzu was strongly dissatisfied with and critical of the feudal rites. Tang Xianzu’s hometown, Linchuan (临川) in Jiangxi Province, was a stronghold of “Xinxue” (the School of Mind), and Tang Xianzu was immersed in this philosophy from a young age. Among his friends were many renowned scholars of Xinxue, including his teacher, Luo Rufang, a distinguished scholar of the Taizhou School.

Additionally, there was a kind of spiritual communication and resonance between Tang Xianzu and the “madman” Li Zhi. Although Tang Xianzu had limited interactions with Li Zhi, Li held a significant place in his heart. Li Zhi advocated the *Tongxin Shuo* (《童心说》) which is reflected in Tang Xianzu’s later work *Mudan Ting* (《牡丹亭》). For instance, Du Liniang (杜丽娘), who bravely pursues love with a romantic mind, represents another concrete manifestation of Li Zhi’s “Doctrine of Child’s Heart.” Li Zhi advocated following natural inclinations, and his unrestrained and uninhibited character coincided with Tang Xianzu’s thoughts and personality. Li Zhi’s ideas, brimming with rebellious colors and a spirit of resistance, enlightened Tang Xianzu, who regarded the love between men and women as noble and immortal. Therefore, the primary source of Tang Xianzu’s concept of Zhiqing Guan (至情观) was the Taizhou School, encompassing thoughts of anti-feudal enlightenment from the Ming dynasty mixed with some anti-rationalist and Buddhist-influenced Confucian ideas. He might be the earliest documented member of the Taizhou School to have contact with Ricci. To commemorate this meeting, Tang Xianzu wrote a poem:

The Lord is depicted on the screen, surrounded by a gauze cage,
With blue eyes, the worried foreigner translates the words.
Just like a dragon examining its scales,
The fragrance originates from the heart of the wood.
Two men came from the West, their journey already remarkable,
With gold as their envoy, what’s there to doubt?
They claim that in India there originally was no Buddha,
This they tell the Lotus Flower’s religious leader.
(画屏天主缘纱笼, 碧眼愁胡译字通。正似瑞龙看甲错, 香膏原在木心中。
二子西来迹已奇, 黄金作使更何疑。自言天竺原无佛, 说与莲花教主知。)
(X. Tang 1992, p. 440)

The record, titled Meeting Two Westerners in Duanzhou Who Refuted Buddhism and Established Their Doctrine, Accidentally Composed in Two Poems (《端州逢西域两生破佛立义, 偶成二首》), documents Tang Xianzu’s interaction with Matteo Ricci.

This poem by Tang Xianzu, written about his encounter with Matteo Ricci, reflects on the cultural exchange and the blending of Chinese traditional culture with Western understanding. “The Lord is depicted on the screen, surrounded by a gauze cage” refers to the altars or icons of Christianity, often covered with damask (a silk fabric), like decorative screens, hinting at the novelty and curiosity towards Western religion. “With blue eyes, the worried foreigner translates the words” describes Matteo Ricci, a Western missionary (blue-eyed symbolizing Westerners), learning Chinese to spread religious messages, with “worries and confusion” possibly indicating the difficulties in language communication. “The fragrance originates from the heart of the wood” implies that the real value or truth (like fragrance) is often hidden beneath the surface (inside the wood). This could mean that its core values are deeply concealed, whether it is Eastern or Western culture. “Two men came from the West, their journey already remarkable” refers to Ricci and his companion coming from the West to China, an extraordinary event. “With gold as their envoy, what is there to doubt?” possibly suggesting that the knowledge and faith brought by Ricci and others are as precious as gold and worthy of exploration and consideration. Overall, this poem expresses Tang Xianzu’s curiosity about Western culture and his praise for Matteo Ricci and others coming to China, highlighting their significance and worthiness of exploration. It also reflects his contemplation on cultural differences and deep communication. Through this poem, we can perceive the complexity and depth of Sino–Western cultural exchange at that time.

The poem further reveals that, at that time, Ricci was still wrestling with whether to renounce his monk title. This point is confirmed in a letter from Ricci to the Jesuit superior general Acquaviva dated 4 November 1595:

We have also decided to abandon the title of “monk”. Up to now, this is how everyone in China refers to us. While “monk” is akin to our term “friar”, it carries a rather demeaning connotation here. (Ricci 2018, p. 169)

By 1595, under the orders of Valignano, Matteo Ricci adopted the attire of a Confucian scholar and began presenting himself as such. In Zhaoqing (肇庆), Ricci encountered Qu Rukui (瞿汝夔), who greatly facilitated their missionary efforts. Due to Qu Rukui’s familial connections with the Ming royal family in Nanchang (南昌), specifically with Prince Jian’an Zhu Duobao (建安王朱多燯), Ricci traveled with him to Nanchang to evangelise. In Nanchang, Qu Rukui introduced Ricci to the circle of scholars and officials, where he made many friends, most notably among them being Zhang Huang (章潢), a disciple of Wang Yangming (Hsia 2020, p. 167). While in Nanchang, Ricci wrote *Jiaoyou Lun* (《交友论》), which was widely praised by the scholarly class. However, Ricci was not content to stay in Nanchang. Driven by his dream to “conquer China” for Christianity, he continuously sought opportunities to travel to the two capitals, Beijing (北京) and Nanjing (南京).

His first two trips to Nanjing were short lived due to the influence of the Wanli Korean War (万历朝鲜战争). As a secondary capital of the Ming dynasty, Nanjing was not particularly welcoming to foreigners then. However, with the war’s end, establishing Nanjing as a missionary base became feasible. On 6 February 1599, Ricci and Qu Rukui arrived again in Nanjing.

3. Social Events in Nanjing City

After Matteo Ricci’s initial setback upon entering Beijing, when he was unsure about whether to stay in Nanjing or Suzhou, he was influenced by Zhu Shilu (祝世禄). Like Jishizhong (礼科给事中) and representative of the Taizhou school of thought (Ricci 2014, p. 241), Zhu Shilu had read Matteo Ricci’s *Jiaoyou Lun* and held him in high regard. When discussing the decision to stay in Nanjing, he said:

“As far as I know, the priest has been living in Jiangxi for a long time and is no longer considered a foreigner coming to China. Why can’t he live in Nanjing? After all, Nanjing also has many Hui people, right?” (据我所知, 神父已在江西住了很长时间, 已经不算来华的外国人了, 为什么不能住在南京呢, 南京不是也有很多回人吗?) (Ricci 2014, p. 241)

Father Matteo Ricci decided to find a good place to stay in Nanjing. Due to a lack of extensive historical records, it is difficult to delve deeper into the interactions between Zhu Shilu and Matteo Ricci during their time in Nanjing. However, Matteo Ricci expressed his gratitude for the assistance he received from Zhu Shilu. He mentioned their interactions multiple times in his book *The Jesuits and the Catholic Church in China's History* (《耶稣会与天主教进入中国史》). For instance, Matteo Ricci entrusted Zhu Shilu with the gifts he intended to present to Emperor Wanli and asked him to keep them safe until Matteo Ricci's return to Beijing. In addition to providing "official permits" for Matteo Ricci's travels, Zhu Shilu introduced the priests to Liu Cheng, the eunuch in charge of the fleet traveling to Beijing. To ensure that Matteo Ricci and his companions would receive better care, Zhu Shilu gave Liu Cheng (刘成) a substantial sum of money (Ricci 2014, p. 270).

In honor of Matteo Ricci, Zhu Shilu composed a poem titled "To Matteo Ricci" (《赠利玛窦》):

Every decade, a reed reaches for the heavens,
 From across the oceans, people come from a hundred nations.
 Should be known to our sovereign, delivering messages from far,
 Sailing through any waters, their presence reaches near and far.
 Their cheeks are tanned, their eyes deep and blue,
 Their bells chime, a hundred marks they pursue.
 Yet Confucius and Mencius are unheard in their voice,
 Day and night, with single-mindedness, they make their choice.
 One meal, one bed, into the infinite they delve,
 Their studies deviate from those of the artisans of loom and spindle.
 Where lies the Dao? Not in our land, they say,
 Laozi went west, and Damo to the east, far away.
 Desiring Chinese language, attire, and customs, they sway,
 Han's regulations follow the Nine Translations' display.
 Transforming themselves from foreigners to saints on display,
 Even today, they receive large sums from high officials, they convey.
 (十年一苇地天长, 百国来从西海洋; 应是吾君文告远, 梯航无处不来王。于腮黄
 卷深瞳碧, 钟巧自鸣分百刻; 宣尼牟尼了不闻, 昼夜一心天咫尺。一斋一榻入无
 穷, 别学偏于象纬工; 道在何之非我土, 老聃西去达摩东。华言华服欲华颠, 汉
 制都从九译传; 一自变夷归圣轨, 至今分给大官钱。) (S. Zhu 1997)

Zhu Shilu's poem vividly portrays Matteo Ricci's enduring missionary work in China and the ensuing cultural exchanges. It depicts Ricci's persistent efforts and subtle yet firm endeavours in spreading his teachings. Also, it reflects the arrival of people from various Western nations to China across the sea, a phenomenon partly facilitated by the Chinese Emperor's open cultural policies and attitudes at the time. The poem mentions advanced maritime technologies that bridged distant lands with China. Ricci's appearance, including his beard and green eyes, is intricately described. The precision of Western clock-making technology, symbolizing the exact segmentation of time, is also highlighted. The poem contemplates the differences between Eastern and Western cultures and religions, suggesting a divergence from China's traditional Confucianism and Buddhism. Ricci's dedication to his mission is portrayed as so intense that it seemingly compresses time and space. His simple lifestyle and profound knowledge, especially in astronomy and geography, are praised.

Additionally, the poem reflects on whether Taoist or religious truths are exclusive to China and observes the exchange of philosophical and religious ideas between the East and the West. It notes the inclination of Westerners to learn Chinese and adopt Chinese clothing, as well as the history of Western knowledge being translated into Chinese. The poem concludes by pointing out the sinicization of foreign cultures, integrating them into traditional Chinese culture, and hints at the financial support or rewards given to Westerners at that time. Overall, the poem demonstrates Zhu Shilu's deep understanding and appreciation of Matteo Ricci and the Western culture he represented and his profound contemplation of the complexities and profundities of Sino-Western cultural exchanges.

Perhaps it was because of Zhu Shilu's role as a bridge that other Taizhou School members could meet Matteo Ricci and establish friendships with him. Zhu Shilu and Jiao Hong (焦竑) were both students of Geng Dingxiang (耿定向) and had previously taught together at the Xinan Huangshu Shuyuan (新安还古书院). Matteo Ricci described him and Jiao Hong in *The History of the Jesuits and the Catholic Church in China* as follows:

In Nanjing, there lived a Jinshi (the highest degree holder in the imperial examination); this was his hometown. He had ranked first in the previous palace examination and wielded considerable influence. However, he later lost his official position and remained idle at home, but he still held a high status and was respected by everyone. This person devoted himself to studying three Chinese religious traditions and was an expert in this field. (Ricci 2014, p. 251)

According to the records of Liang Qingyuan (梁清远) in the Qing dynasty, there were indeed some interactions between the two:

When the Western missionary Matteo Ricci first arrived in China, Jiao Hong asked him, "Do you know about the teachings of Confucius?" Ricci replied, "I do not know". Jiao continued, "How about the teachings of Buddhism and Daoism?" Ricci replied, "I do not know". Jiao asked, "Then, as a scholar from your own country, what do you know?" Ricci responded, "Every country has its sages; why should they be the same?" 西士利玛窦初至中国，焦竑问曰：“若知孔氏之教乎？”曰：“不知也。”“抑知释与老乎？”亦曰：“不知也。”焦曰：“若尔乡学者，宜何从？”曰：“一国自有一国圣人，奚必同？” (Liang 1997)

Li Jianxiong (李剑雄), when discussing the relationship between Matteo Ricci and Jiao Hong, used the phrase "he seemed to have some criticisms of Jiao Hong" (他对焦竑，似有微词). He quoted from the 1983 edition of *Notes on Matteo Ricci in China* (《利玛窦中国札记》), where Gao Ze (高泽) translated the Italian phrase "se ne stava in casa con grandestato, venerato da tutti" (D'Elia 1942) as "lives leisurely at home, leading a life of comfort and privilege" (Ricci and Trigault 1983). In the inaccurate translation by Wen Zheng (文铮) in *The History of the Jesuits and the Catholic Church in China*, it is precisely rendered as "living in leisure at home, yet still maintaining a high social status" (赋闲在家，却仍有很高的地位). Although this statement alone does not prove Li Jianxiong's point of having criticisms, Matteo Ricci did mention in his writings about his interactions with Xu Guangqi (徐光启):

Paul Xu came to visit his teacher in Nanjing. This man's surname is Jiao, and he is one of China's most famous scholars. He vehemently promotes Buddhism and criticises the foreigner's religion, which excited Paul Xu. He advised him to abandon this faith. Paul Xu knew he couldn't persuade and was unwilling to argue further with him, so he brushed it off. He introduced the teacher's situation to the priests and ridiculed this gentleman's ignorance. (徐保禄来南京拜访他的老师，此人姓焦，是中国最有名的文人之一，他极力鼓吹佛教，申斥徐保禄兴奋外国人的宗教，劝他放弃这一信仰，徐保禄知道无法说服他，也不愿再同他理论，只是敷衍了事。他（徐保禄）向神父们介绍了他老师的全部情况，并嘲笑了这位先生的无知。) (Ricci 2014, p. 459)

Matteo Ricci's account supports the notion that he may have had some criticisms of Jiao Hong. However, Xu Guangqi, who did not pass the imperial examination, was very grateful for Jiao Hong's patronage and showed great respect to him throughout his life. It is less likely that he would have made such statements. After Xu Guangqi passed the imperial examination (中进士), he shared the good news with Jiao Hong in a letter. As below:

They are bearing the weighty responsibilities of Yi Yin and Zhou Gong, passing down the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, counselling both heaven and humanity, ranking first in the literary world, leaning on the sun and the moon, unmatched in historiography. When the myriad of streams converges in their time, dare not forget their source in the vast abyss; when peach and plum trees form a dense grove, it is all due to their nurturing of the universe. I, unworthy, still aspire with a heart ready to stand in the snow, seeking recognition, rather than car-

rying the burden of facing the wall in regret. (任伊、周之重任，传孔、孟之真传，策对天人，词林第一，身倚日月，史笔无比。百川时至，敢忘溟渤渊源；桃李成蹊，全是乾坤覆育。吾斯未信，有怀立雪之心；求为可知，宁负面墙之训。) (Jianxiong Li 1998, p. 78)

Xu Guangqi praised Jiao Hong's illustrious past and expressed his nostalgia and un-forgotten feelings for his teacher. Therefore, it is likely that Xu Guangqi did not mock Jiao Hong. Still, Matteo Ricci borrowed Xu Guangqi's voice to express his dissatisfaction with Jiao Hong's unwillingness to convert to Catholicism. For Matteo Ricci, persuading prominent figures from the "Sanjiao Lingxiu" (三教领袖) to embrace Christianity would significantly advance his Catholic missionary work.

During his interactions with Jiao Hong, Matteo Ricci also learned from Li Zhi. According to scholars' research, their first meeting took place in the winter of the 27th year of the Wanli reign (1599) at Li Ruzhen's (李汝祯) residence (Hsia 2020, p. 203). At that time, Matteo Ricci, Li Ruzhen, and followers, including the eminent Buddhist monk Xuelang Dashi (雪浪大师), also known as Sanyun or Sanhuai (三槐、三淮), engaged in debates on topics such as the nature of the universe and the Creator (Ricci 2014, p. 257). Li Ruzhen invited Li Zhi and Jiao Jing to participate in the gathering. Subsequently, Li Zhi visited Ricci and composed a poem. The exchange of gifts, where Li Zhi presented a Chinese folding fan with a poem he inscribed to Matteo Ricci, is recorded in the book *Fenshu* (《焚书》) in Volume Six, titled "Zeng Li Xitai" (《赠利西泰》).

They are roaming freely to the Northern Sea, meandering southward on an expedition.

Sarira relics carry the name and surname; immortal mountains record the journey.

I am turning back after ten thousand li, gazing upon nine-tiered cities.

Have you witnessed the brilliance of the nation? Amid the day, the sun shines brightly. 逍遥下北溟，迤邐向南征。刹利标名姓，仙山纪水程。回头十万里，举目九重城。观国之光未？中天日正明。(Z. Li 1975)

Li Zhi's poem profoundly conveys his understanding and appraisal of Matteo Ricci and the Western culture he represented. The poem depicts Ricci's journey from the distant West to China, marked by a spirit of freedom and exploration. His travel, full of twists and turns, points to his journey towards China, located south of his homeland. Through the metaphor of an Indian warrior class, Ricci's sense of mission and courage is subtly implied. The poem also symbolically mentions Ricci's study and exploration of Chinese culture and his long journey from afar to China. The imagery of him finally reaching the heart of China is vividly portrayed. The poem raises a question, inquiring whether Ricci has perceived China's culture and wisdom while expressing its brilliance and knowledge at its peak. Overall, the poem conveys Li Zhi's recognition of Ricci's journey from the distant West to China and his appreciation for Ricci's exploration of Chinese culture. It also reflects pride in traditional Chinese culture and affirms its splendour.

Giulio Aleni (1582–1649) also mentioned in *Daxi Xitai Lixiansheng Xingji* 《大西西泰利先生行迹》:

Li Zuowu, an eminent scholar from Wenling, was in the southern capital at the time, and he visited Mr. Li to discuss matters. Those who conversed with him knew deeply that he understood the true principles of celestial learning. (温陵卓吾李公，时在南都，过访利子，谈论者，深知天学之为真。) (Aleni 2012, p. 277)

Later, the two met again in Jining (山东), Shandong (山东), and with the help of Li Zhi, Matteo Ricci had the opportunity to meet Liu Dongxing (刘东星), who was the Caoyun Zongdu (漕运总督) at the time (Junping Li 2010). In the same year, Li Zhi wrote a letter to a friend, addressing questions about Matteo Ricci. As below:

Regarding Mr. Xitai (Matteo Ricci), Xitai was from the far West. He travelled over 100,000 li (Chinese miles), initially sailing to the southern regions of India, where he first learned of Buddhism, having travelled more than 40,000 li by then. Upon

reaching Guangzhou in south China, he learned about our Great Ming dynasty, the ancient sage emperors Yao and Shun, and later Confucius and Mencius. He settled in Zhaoqing in the southern sea and has spent nearly twenty years there. He has read all our Chinese books. He has studied and memorised the annotations and commentaries, comprehending the profound principles of the “Four Books” and the elucidations of the “Six Classics”. He can now speak our language, write in our script, and observe our rituals and customs. He is an extraordinary individual, both internally profound and externally simple. There is no chaos or confusion when dozens of people gather around him, engaging in lively debates and discussions. Among those I have encountered, none can compare to him. He neither comes across as arrogant nor obsequious, flaunts his intelligence, or appears excessively dull. Everyone defers to him. However, I do not understand why he has come here. I have met him three times now, but I still do not understand the purpose of his visit. It seems he wishes to replace the teachings of Confucius and Mencius with his knowledge, but that would be too foolish. I fear that is not his intention. (承公问及利西泰。西泰，大西域人也。到中国十万余里，初航海至南天竺，始知有佛，已走四万余里矣。及抵广州南海，然后知我大明国土，先有尧舜，后有周孔。住南海肇庆，几二十载，凡我国书籍无不读，请先辈与订音释，请明于“四书”性理者，解其大义，又请明于“六经”疏义者，通其解说。今尽能言我此间之言，作此间之文字，行此间之仪礼，是一极标致人也。中极玲珑，外极朴实，数十人群聚喧杂、讎对各得，傍不得以其间斗之使乱。我所见人，未有其比。非过亢则过谄，非露聪明则太闷闷瞶瞶者，皆让之矣。但不知到此何为。我已经三度相会，毕竟不知到此何干也。意其欲以所学，易吾周孔之学，则又太愚，恐非是尔。) (Z. Li 1974)

French sinologist Gernet Jacques pointed out: “This is a testimony from a great Chinese scholar about Matteo Ricci around 1600. It reveals his high admiration for Matteo Ricci and some confusion regarding his motives for coming to China. The final comment indicates that Li Zhi noticed a strange religious enthusiasm in this missionary, and his awkwardness can be explained: Matteo Ricci was careful not to let others know his true intentions; instead, he satisfied himself by citing classics and giving them meaning favourable to his arguments” (Gernet 1982). Shen Dingping (沈定平) has a similar view: “This passage shows that Matteo Ricci... always concealed his purpose for coming to China, but in the eyes of the experienced Li Zhi, his actions of ‘wanting to replace our Confucian and Mencian teachings with his knowledge’ were visible. However, he couldn’t believe Matteo Ricci would be so presumptuous, so he wrote with some hesitation and confusion” (Shen 2007). After Li Zhi’s imprisonment and suicide, Matteo Ricci said, “God suddenly helped us with His divine will, suppressing our enemies and those who supported them”. The Minister of Rites, Feng Qi, and the Imperial Censor, Zhang Wenda, who had pushed for Li Zhi’s imprisonment, later became friends with Matteo Ricci (Ricci 2014, p. 309).

Finally, it is worth mentioning Xu Guangqi, who was closely connected to Matteo Ricci. They first met in Nanjing and formed a deep friendship. Later, Xu Guangqi converted to Catholicism in Nanjing. After passing the imperial examination, Xu Guangqi was supposed to be transferred, but Matteo Ricci and other Jesuits encouraged him to take the exam and stay in Beijing. Matteo Ricci believed that Xu Guangqi, with his position in the capital, would be an essential ally for them (Ricci 2018, p. 219). Matteo Ricci had a very pragmatic attitude toward imparting Western scientific knowledge to Xu Guangqi. He thought Xu Guangqi should focus on advancing his career rather than continuing scientific research. He praised Xu Guangqi as an excellent fellow believer who provided them with great help in the capital, always willing to assist them when needed (Ricci 2018, pp. 238–39).

During this period, Xu Guangqi’s most significant contribution to Matteo Ricci was related to an incident in which Spanish forces massacred Chinese people in the Philippines. There were a lot of discussions about this incident within Beijing, and Emperor Wanli dispatched an envoy to the Philippines to gather information. The Spanish also wrote a letter

to officials in Fujian province about this matter, which was later translated into Chinese and sent to Beijing. The translated version mentioned that the letter was written in the year 1603, which coincided with the publication date of *Tian Zhu Shi Yi*, a book written by Matteo Ricci. Xu Guangqi noticed this issue and kept it confidential (Ricci 2018, p. 223).

At that time, there were two principles that the Jesuits could not violate: first, they could not have direct contact with foreigners, exchange information, or let the Chinese know that they received assistance from abroad, and second, they could not propagate new religious doctrines in China. Matteo Ricci once said, “The Chinese do not recognise that we share the same faith as the Spaniards because in Spain, the Chinese pronunciation of ‘God’ is ‘Dios,’ whereas here, following the Portuguese pronunciation, we read it as ‘Deus’” (Ricci 2018, p. 223). Portugal had already been annexed by Spain, and missionaries in Macau had sworn allegiance to the Spanish king to gain support for their missionary work. However, Matteo Ricci and others were particularly careful not to let others know about their relationship with the Spaniards.

Matteo Ricci and Xu Guangqi both served as important bridges for the exchange of Chinese and Western cultures. Their work expanded the Chinese worldview and, at the same time, allowed Westerners to gain insights into Chinese thought and culture. Their partnership was not one-sided; Ricci also benefited greatly from Xu’s insights into Chinese philosophy and governance. Through Xu, Ricci was able to deepen his understanding of Chinese culture and society, which he documented in his writings. These works provided Europeans with some of their earliest and most detailed accounts of Chinese civilization, fostering a greater appreciation and curiosity about China in the Western world. In essence, Matteo Ricci and Xu Guangqi were more than just bridges for cultural exchange; they were architects of a new era of intercultural dialogue. Their collaborative spirit and mutual respect for each other’s cultures set a precedent for future exchanges between China and the West. Their work expanded the horizons of both worlds, allowing for a profound and lasting exchange of ideas, knowledge, and understanding that continued to shape global interactions for centuries to come.

Unlike Xu Guangqi, who openly embraced Matteo Ricci and converted to Catholicism, Jiao Hong’s specific stance towards Ricci is not explicitly recorded in historical documents. The only reference to Jiao’s view of Ricci is in his work “Gucheng Wenda,” where he positively mentions Ricci’s concept from “Jiaoyou Lun”: “The Westerner Matteo Ricci says: ‘A friend is, indeed, a second self.’ His words are very peculiar, yet very appropriate.” (西域利君言：友者，乃第二我也。其言甚奇，亦甚当。) (K. Tang 2017, p. 395) However, Ricci’s own accounts suggest that Jiao Hong, a leader in the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, was naturally opposed to Ricci, often employing irony in their interactions. In contrast, Tang Xianzu, Zhu Shilu, and Li Zhi all expressed respect and admiration for Ricci, recognising his significant contributions to Sino–Western cultural exchanges. They acknowledged Ricci’s crucial role in enhancing mutual understanding and integration between the two cultures. However, their approaches differed subtly: Tang Xianzu delved into the complexities of cultural differences and exchanges, Zhu Shilu focused on Ricci’s journey and his grasp of Chinese culture, while Li Zhi’s poetry underscored the importance of cultural exchange in fostering mutual understanding. In conclusion, while these notable Taizhou School figures varied in their focus and approach, their collective works demonstrate an openness to Western culture and a high regard for Ricci as an agent of cultural exchange. Their writings offer insights into the Chinese intellectual community’s receptivity to foreign cultures and their aspiration for meaningful cultural interactions.

4. Collision of Ideas

From the interactions between Matteo Ricci and Xu Guangqi, Jiao Hong, Li Zhi, and others, we can see that his core idea of “combining Confucianism, supplementing Confucianism, promoting Confucianism, and suppressing Buddhism” gradually took shape during this period. During this time, the two sides had a clash of ideas. Although there is

a lack of direct evidence in the literature, it can be inferred from the views of Jiao Hong, Li Zhi, and Matteo Ricci on issues such as human nature and cosmology.

Looking back at the most well-known discussion that took place at Li Ruzhen's residence in Nanjing, the following was documented:

The banquet began, and the guests sat at many tables. Since Father Matteo was a foreigner, he was seated at the head table. The discussion began with a popular question in Chinese academies at the time: Is human nature inherently good, inherently evil, or without distinction? If it is good, then where does evil come from? If it is evil, then where does goodness come from? If it is neither good nor evil, then who taught people to distinguish between good and evil? However, their thinking lacked logic, and they needed to learn to differentiate between innate human nature and acquired traits. Of course, they also did not understand that humans had fallen due to original sin and needed the salvation and grace of God. Even today, this question remains unresolved for them. Therefore, on that day, they discussed for over an hour, with proponents of the goodness of human nature and the evil of human nature providing many examples to refute each other's arguments. (Ricci 2014, p. 257)

The viewpoint mentioned by the monk from Sanhuai during the debate, "The Lord of Heaven and Earth is neither good nor evil" (天地之主既不善，也不恶), aligns with the thoughts of Wang Yangming: "In the heart, there is neither good nor evil; good and evil arise from intentions; knowing good and knowing evil is the conscience; doing good and avoiding evil is the principle of things" (无善无恶心之体，有善有恶意之动，知善知恶是良知，为善去恶是格物). Jiao Hong and other disciples of the Taizhou School held a similar view, rejecting the "innate goodness" (性善论) theory often revered by Confucian scholars like Mencius. They also believed that "good and evil were not fixed concepts" (善恶无定). Jiao Hong unified human "nature" (性) and the "Dao" (道), asserting that it was initially "neither good nor not good" (无善无不善), and he advocated that "nature inherently lacks sub-stance" (性本无物). He said, "Goodness is from nature, but nature is not inherently good. To consider good as nature is acceptable, but to consider nature as inherently good would be to focus on one thing and neglect the others" (善，自性也，而性，非善也。谓善为性则可，谓性为善，则举一而废百矣。). Nature is empty, without inherent goodness or evil, encompassing all things (Jianxiong Li 1998, pp. 97–98).

Li Zhi, in his work *Fenshu* (Burnt Books), also believed in "neither good nor evil; this is the ultimate goodness" (无善无恶，是为至善). In *Tongxin Shuo*, Li Zhi expounded his views on human nature:

The child's heart is the true heart. If the child's heart is considered unacceptable, it is equivalent to deeming the true heart unacceptable. The child's heart is the purest and most fundamental core of the initial thought. If the child's heart is lost, then the true heart is lost, and the true person is lost. If a person is not true, there is no return to the beginning". "Child's heart" refers to the original, pure heart of a person, untouched by corruption, and thus, it is considered the most perfect, holding the potential for all goodness. Li Zhi believed that the child's heart represented the initial and purest essence of humanity. (夫童心者，真心也。若以童心为不可，是以真心为不可也。夫童心者，绝假纯真，最初一念之本心也。若失却童心，便失却真心；失却真心，便失却真人。人而非真，全不复有初矣。童子者，人之初也；童心者，心之初也。)

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, a core doctrine of Catholicism, shares similarities with Li Zhi's idea of the "child's heart". However, it is essential to distinguish between sin and evil as two different concepts. The doctrine of original sin refers to the sin committed by Adam and Eve when they ate the forbidden fruit, which led to their knowledge of good and evil and their estrangement from God. This doctrine does not directly relate to the moral aspects of human nature. In Matteo Ricci's time, Western thought was influenced by the three-stage theory of human nature:

“original nature”, created by God in His own image and inherently good; “fallen nature”, which is sinful; and “redeemed nature”, regenerated through divine grace and inherently good (Standaert and Sun 2004).

During the debate, Matteo Ricci responded to Sanhuai’s viewpoint by saying, “The sun is bright and never dark because its nature is brightness” (太阳是明亮的, 绝不会黑暗, 因为它的本性就是明亮). He believed that humans, created by God, were inherently good because God is inherently good. His advocacy of the inherent goodness of human nature was derived from the three-stage theory of human nature mentioned earlier. In his work *Tian Zhu Shi Yi*, he argued for the doctrine of inherent goodness. In the section titled “Explaining the Inextinguishable Intention and Discussing the Rewards and Punishments of Heaven and Hell After Death to Repay People for Their Good and Evil Deeds” (释解意不可灭, 并论死后必有天堂地狱之赏罚, 以报世人所为善恶), he said:

Western Scholar: “This learning aims to turn people into rocks and stones”. Implying that if God has no intention and no goodness, people would be the same as rocks and stones. He calls it “The Learning of Principle”? Alas! Alas! (西士曰: 此学欲人为土石者耳。谓上帝宗义, 有是哉? 若上帝无意无善, 亦将等之乎土石也。谓之“理学”? 悲哉! 悲哉!) (Ricci 2003, p. 137)

In the seventh section, “Discussing the Inherent Goodness of Human Nature and Presenting the Correct Learning of the Lord of Heaven” (论人性本善, 而述天主门士正学), he stated his view that human nature is inherently good. God endowed humans with this nature, capable of choosing between good and evil, to elevate humanity. Enabling humans to choose between these two not only enhances their own goodness, but also makes their goodness our own. Therefore, it is said, “God created me not for His use but to benefit me”. This is the essence of it. It is like setting a target for shooting practice; it is not to make the shooter miss but to improve their skills. Likewise, God’s creation of evil tendencies in the world is not meant to force people into evil. 天主赋人此性, 能行二者, 所以厚人类也, 其能取舍此善, 非但增为善之功, 尤俾其功为我功焉。故曰: “天主所以生我, 非用我; 所以善我, 乃用我。” 此之谓也。即如设正鹄, 非使射者失之; 亦犹恶情於世, 非以使人之为。(Ricci 2003, p. 154).

Matteo Ricci’s *Tian Zhu Shi Yi* was based on the work of Francisco Suarez, *De Anima* (*On the Soul*), especially the first seven treatises that correspond to the first five lectures of Suarez’s work. Suarez used the philosophical systems of Aristotle and Aquinas to prove the existence of the “first principle” (第一原理), which is God, and provided examples to support his arguments. Similar examples can be found in *Tian Zhu Shi Yi*. For instance, just as creating a “bronze ball” or a “palace” requires a “skilled craftsman”, the world also needs a designer, which is God. Matteo Ricci used this analogy to argue that God is the ruler of the human heart and the universe (Meynard 2013). Since humans and the universe are created by God, their natures are inherently good, and all evil arises from individual faults. Evil is not something beyond the natural essence, form, or order; it is a deviation from the original nature. Evil is nothing more than the absence of good. This perspective aligns with the views expressed by Augustine in his works *On True Religion* and *On the Nature of Good*, where he argued that the fall of humanity’s first ancestors led to the emergence of sin and that this sin results from the free will of humans. Augustine closely linked the problem of evil with the issue of free will, asserting that without freedom, the problem of evil cannot be addressed. This aligns with Li Zhi’s emphasis on human freedom in *Tongxin Shuo* and the distinction he drew between human nature and good and evil, focusing on the “initial thought” (最初一念). Li Zhi acknowledged the rationality of selfish desires within human nature and considered them as part of the “child’s heart”. In the context of Catholicism, it was Eve’s selfish desire and act of eating the forbidden fruit that led to the original sin’s contamination of humanity.

Cosmology and theories of human nature are closely interconnected. Since the Song dynasty, Neo-Confucianism has generally embraced the idea, present in Chinese thought since ancient times, that humans and the universe are interconnected. Whether it is heaven, Earth, humans, or all things in the world, they are seen as different manifestations of “Qi”

(气), an abstract substance. The concept of “Qi” is central to the philosophy of Zhang Zai (张载), and according to the interpretation by Feng Youlan (冯友兰), “qi” can be likened, in an abstract sense, to Plato’s concept of “matter”, corresponding to “idea”. On the one hand, it represents latent reality, with no form or image of its own, identical to the “Taiji” (太极). On the other hand, it can specialise into any shape, resulting from the contraction or expansion of “Qi”. While “qi” itself, as “Tai Xu” (太虚) or “Taiji”, is inherently good, during the process of differentiation, it can often lead to some form of imbalance or one-sidedness, thus undermining this goodness and providing a source for “E” (恶) or “Changhe” (场合). Later, Zhu Xi supplemented this theory in his Confucianism, introducing the concept of “Li” (理), also known as “Xing” (性) or “Dao” (道), which he equated with “Taiji”. “Qi” remained as the substance, and “Li” became the “principle of goodness” (至善的法则), or the “law of the supreme good”. “Li” exists within all things and can be understood through “gewu” (格物), or the “investigation of things”, as “Zhizhi” (致知), and it exists prior to “Qi”, as in “Before there was this ‘Qi,’ there was this ‘Li’” (未有此气, 先有此理) (Ch’ien 2017, pp. 217–18).

The cosmological views of the Taizhou School were influenced by traditional “Hun-tian” (浑天说) cosmology, the *Zhou Bi Suan Jing* (《周髀算经》), and Confucian classics. They believed that all things in the universe were composed of “Qi” and took shape as specific forms of “Qi”, constituting material existence. The “sky” (distinguished from the abstract concept of “heaven” or “xing” mentioned later) was considered a vast space, similar to an eggshell, encompassing both the Earth and the stars. The position of the Earth in the centre of the sky changes with the seasons, creating a rising and falling cycle corresponding to the four seasons. Heaven, Earth, humans, and all things coexist and interact with each other. Jiao Hong described this interaction as a kind of “mutual usurpation” (互窃), where they “divide” each other’s “possession” (which can be understood as the material that makes up their being or “Qi”). As for “heaven”, which Jiao Hong defined as the “universal name for all things” (万物之总名) and the “creative force of the universe” (宇宙造化) as a metaphysical concept encompassing the whole of heaven, Earth, and humanity in this creative process, it transcends perception, is identical to human “Xing”, and becomes synonymous with human “Dao”.

Jiao Hong’s concept of the unity of “Xing” and “Dao” (性道一耳) is not just the “Tian Dao” (天道) of Confucianism, but also resembles the “emptiness” or “void” of Buddhism and Taoism. “Dao” is a “principle”, the origin of the world and its source, having no form, beyond linguistic description, transcending sensory perception, and being devoid of moral or physical qualities. In this regard, it bears striking resemblance to the Holy Trinity of the Catholic Church’s “God the Father, God the Son (Holy Spirit)”. The “Dao”, as the origin and source of the world, resonates in many ways with the Holy Spirit, who is also considered the source of life and power in Christian theology. Both the “Dao” and the Holy Spirit are intangible, omnipresent forces. They are viewed as foundational powers of the universe within their respective religious traditions, influencing all life forms. Suppose Matteo Ricci had been able to honestly convey his missionary purpose to figures like Jiao Hong and Li Zhi. In that case, they might have further integrated the “Sanjiao Yiguan” (三教一贯) into their thought, incorporating Catholicism into this synthesis. A new form of Chinese Catholicism influenced by Neo-Confucianism akin to “Kuang Chan” (狂禅) might have emerged in such a fusion of ideas.

The Taizhou School scholars and Matteo Ricci had divergent perspectives on human nature and the cosmos, shaped by their philosophical and religious backgrounds. The Taizhou scholars, including Jiao Hong and Li Zhi, leaned towards the idea that human nature is neither inherently good nor evil. This view aligns with the thoughts of Buddhist monk Sanhuai and Confucian scholar Wang Yangming, who also believed in the neutrality of human nature. Jiao Hong saw human nature as a combination of ‘nature’ and ‘Dao,’ inherently empty and encompassing all possibilities. Li Zhi emphasised the purity and perfection of the childlike heart, which he saw as the original state of human nature, untainted and full of potential. Contrasting with the Taizhou School, Ricci, from a Catholic

background, viewed human nature as inherently good, created in the image of God. He believed in original sin, where humans fell from their original goodness but could be redeemed through divine grace.

Ricci's view was based on the three stages of human nature: original goodness, fallen nature, and redeemed nature. Influenced by traditional Chinese thought and the concept of Qi, the Taizhou scholars viewed the universe as an interplay of Qi in various forms. They believed in a dynamic, interconnected system where heaven, earth, and all beings are mutually dependent. Their cosmology was grounded in the notion that everything, including humans, is a manifestation of Qi, with Jiao Hong describing the universe and human nature as fundamentally united. Ricci's cosmological views were influenced by Christian theology, where the universe and humans are creations of God, inherently excellent but capable of evil due to personal faults. He saw the cosmos as governed by divine order, with evil being a distortion or absence of sound rather than an inherent aspect of nature. The Taizhou School's scholars viewed human nature and the universe through a lens of neutrality and potential, emphasising the interconnectedness of all things and the fundamental unity of spirit and the Dao.

On the other hand, Ricci approached these topics from a Christian perspective, seeing human nature as inherently good but fallen and the cosmos as a creation of a benevolent God governed by divine order and grace. The exchange of ideas between the Taizhou School scholars and Matteo Ricci, characterised by their contrasting perspectives on key philosophical concepts, played a pivotal role in enriching the intellectual and cultural dialogue between the East and West. This interaction highlighted the diversity within Chinese philosophical thought and introduced new dimensions of Western thinking, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of human nature and the cosmos.

5. Summary

The concept of "school of thoughts" proposed by early Qing historians like Huang Zhongxi (黄宗羲), when addressing philosophical discussions among traditional Chinese intellectuals, is outdated. While categorising the Taizhou School as a distinct school of thought may not be appropriate, this does not negate the common philosophical foundation in their interactions with Matteo Ricci. The Taizhou School scholars who interacted with Ricci did share similar academic connections, reflecting certain commonalities in their intellectual and political ideas, as seen in the ideological consistency between Tang Xianzu and Li Zhi.

This paper first revisits the academic history, acknowledging the extensive discussions on the intellectual encounters between Matteo Ricci and Li Zhi. However, these discussions often focus on specific instances. We propose a new perspective to identify a common thread that represents the scholarly group of the late Ming Dynasty. To this end, examining the collective viewpoints of scholars, particularly through a left-wing Wang school like the Taizhou School, proves insightful for our research. This is especially pertinent considering the pivotal roles of figures like Zhu Shilu and Li Zhi in facilitating Ricci's assimilation into Chinese society. Our analysis of writings about Matteo Ricci by Tang Xianzu, Zhu Shilu, Li Zhi, and Jiao Hong reveals their genuine recognition of Ricci's potential to introduce fresh and diverse thoughts and cultures to the Ming court. This aspiration was to challenge and break through the dogmatism, ethnocentrism, and hypocrisy prevalent in the late Ming Confucian doctrines. This objective resonates with the Taizhou School's endeavour to escape the confines of Cheng-Zhu Confucianism, advocating for broader inclusivity in practicing morality and understanding the Dao. This is encapsulated in their principle of "Baixing Riyong Ji Dao" (百姓日用即道). Despite the eventual divergence in their paths, the underlying differences in fundamental thoughts between the two parties are revealing. By dissecting their varying perspectives on "human nature," "views on good and evil," and "cosmology," we gain insights into why the Taizhou School scholars generally gravitated towards the "unity of the three religions." While their ideas were revolutionary for their time, they did not completely deviate from the millennia-old paradigm

of traditional Chinese Confucianism. Matteo Ricci's introduction of Western thought, however, opened a new window of possibilities. Particularly, we delve into the philosophical stance of the Taizhou School scholars towards the "unity of the three religions," analysing its connection to and innovation from traditional Confucian thought. This is exemplified in the case of Xu Guangqi, a disciple of Jiao Hong, who emerged from the left-wing faction of the Wang School, embracing Western thought and striving to bridge the cultural gap between China and the West. The exploration here offers a new lens on the intricate interactions between the Taizhou School and Matteo Ricci. It delves into their ideological similarities and differences, probing how these variances shaped the trajectory of subsequent Sino-Western cultural exchanges. The analysis extends to individuals like Xu Guangqi, shedding light on their roles and contributions, thereby unraveling the deeper layers of interactions and transformations within these cultural exchanges. More than a historical recount of the Taizhou School and Ricci's exchanges, this exploration represents a profound theoretical investigation into a pivotal moment in Sino-Western cultural exchange history. Enhancing the understanding of the complexities of cultural and intellectual exchanges of the time offers fresh perspectives for assessing and comprehending the blend of Chinese and Western philosophies and cultures. Ultimately, it underscores the dynamism and multidimensionality of cultural and intellectual exchange during this era, contributing unique insights into the study of cultural exchanges of that period.

In conclusion, the Taizhou School's advocacy of "Baixing Riyong Ji Dao" suggests that anyone, regardless of social status, can understand Dao through self-cultivation and moral practice. This concept embodies the universality and equality promoted by the Taizhou School, breaking free from the constraints of Cheng-Zhu Confucianism and enabling a more comprehensive range of people to engage in moral practice and understand Dao. Catholicism's "universality of the common good" is reflected in its global missionary activities. Catholicism believes that all individuals should receive redemption, and therefore, their missionary efforts are not limited by race, gender, age, or social status; they aim to reach people worldwide. The commonality between these two lies in their emphasis on universality and equality, advocating that everyone, regardless of their social standing, has the possibility and right to pursue Dao or accept redemption. This high regard for and equal treatment of human nature reflects a shared humanistic spirit. As Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz once said, "The two greatest civilizations and the most highly cultured nations on earth, Europe and China, have reached the highest degree of civilization at opposite ends of the earth... Perhaps providence has ordained that they should eventually meet and bring all nations into a more reasonable way of life" (Leibniz 2005, p. 1).

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