

## Article

# The Imagination of Alchemy: A Chinese Response to Catholicism in Late Ming and Early Qing

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**Abstract:** As a common cultural phenomenon in China and the West, alchemy not only embodies the scientific spirit of people before modern times, but also contains certain religious beliefs, and even creates unrealistic secular imaginations. When Catholicism entered China during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Chinese also projected this imagination of alchemy onto the missionaries. Behind this imagination actually lays the strong interest of Chinese people in the financial resources of the missionaries. On the one hand, there is the historical influence of traditional Chinese alchemy, and on the other hand, there is the curiosity caused by the lifestyle of missionaries in China. The imagination of alchemy not only reflects a historical aspect of the encounter between China and the West during the Ming and Qing dynasties, but also reflects a complex social psychology of mixed curiosity, panic, suspicion, and vigilance in pre-modern China.

**Keywords:** alchemy; mercury; Matteo Ricci; the source of funds

## 1. Introduction

When two heterogeneous cultures meet at the initial stage, what attracts each other's attention first is often not the profound classic principles, but their various external manifestations. For example, when Buddhism first entered China, those who accepted it were usually not very clear about its principles, but they regarded it as a kind of magic which was blended with ancient Chinese beliefs in gods and ghosts (Tang 2015, p. 47). A similar situation also appeared when Catholicism came to China in the late Ming Dynasty. In the eyes of the Chinese at that time, the Jesuits who entered China were not only "foreign monks" (番僧) and "Western confucians" (西儒), but also alchemists who may have mastered some occult arts. Based on relevant historical records, this article attempts to analyze how the Chinese people's obsession and imagination of traditional alchemy were projected onto the missionaries, thus revealing a phenomenon during the Ming and Qing dynasties that deserves further discussion<sup>1</sup>. Although some fragmentary accounts of the time have helped us to understand the existence of this phenomenon, its inner meaning has not yet been assessed as a whole. First, the alchemical imagination was not just a particular Chinese hobby, but a relatively popular and valued cultural phenomenon, clearly rooted in China's long alchemical tradition. Second, the lifestyles and social activities of the missionaries in China also contributed, to some extent, to the alchemical imagination. The imagination may arise mostly because missionaries neither have families, nor are officials, nor engage in business, nor go out for alms, but they can live a decent life that only a few people can enjoy. Therefore, the Chinese who are not clear about their living conditions naturally suspect the existence of financial resources behind it. Finally, and most importantly, although the missionaries in China and their Chinese friends repeatedly and explicitly refuted the rumors of alchemy, it was difficult to avoid the concerns raised by the question of funding, and the potential risks and dilemmas of this issue. While they tried to shake off the false label of alchemists, they gradually realized that being honest about the true source of their funding actually exposed their economic ties to the West, a world that was almost completely unknown to the Chinese at the time. Such economic



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ties naturally gave rise to suspicions about national security and led the missionaries into endless political accusations that largely obscured their faith motivation.

## 2. Chinese Alchemy as an Ancient Art

The roles of the missionaries who came to China during the Ming and Qing dynasties, as well as the knowledge they imparted, were very complex and varied, and so were the images they presented to the Chinese. Interestingly, the alchemist was also one of their images. However, this image of the alchemist is not an unfounded speculation, it is based on some unsubstantiated observations of reality, and it is also influenced by a long historical tradition in China, that of Taoist alchemy.

The ancient Chinese alchemy is also called “Huang bai shu” (黃白術) (see [Hu 2009](#); [Pregadio 2005](#); [Yoke 2007](#); [Kohn 2000](#), pp. 165–91). Ge Hong (葛洪, 283–343), a famous Taoist in the Eastern Jin Dynasty (東晉), explained “Yellow is gold. White is silver. The ancients valued secrets and didn’t want to speak out directly, so they used secret language” (黃者，金也。白者，銀也。古人秘重其道，不欲指斥，故隱之云爾) ([Ge 1985](#), p. 283). There is no essential difference between “huang bai” (黃白) and the so-called “wai dan” (external alchemy 外丹), because “huang bai” is a necessary process to obtain “wai dan”, and its ultimate purpose is to swallow it and achieve immortality. It is just that in the later stage, some people only pursue the gold and silver and no longer swallow it, so these two goals gradually develop in different directions.

The origin of external alchemy is due to the legend of immortals and the belief in immortality in the Warring States Period (戰國, 475/403 B.C.–221 B.C). In particular, Qin Shihuang (秦始皇) and Emperor Wu (武帝) of the Western Han Dynasty (西漢) had diligently pursued the immortal alchemy and elixir, and spent a lot of money and manpower. It can be said that the reason why external alchemy became extremely popular in the Han Dynasty was the pursuit of immortality. The process of refining the outer elixir was originally the process of exploring the way of immortality, and gold and silver were just the additional products in the process.

As far as the pursuer’s belief is concerned, the essence of external alchemy is to develop the elixir of life, so its method is particularly critical. The research of Joseph Needham (1900–1995) pointed out that the ancient Chinese alchemical tradition can be shown to have arisen from three distinct roots: (a) the pharmaceutical-botanical search for macrobiotic plants, (b) the metallurgical-chemical discoveries of processes for aurification and aurifaction, and (c) the pharmaceutical-mineralogical use of inorganic substances in therapy. All three roots must have started at least as early as the Warring States period, and the unified tradition must have taken its permanent form by the end of the 1st century ([Needham 1974](#), p. 14). Therefore, external alchemy combines the belief of the immortals with the knowledge of chemistry and medicine.

According to Ge Hong’s theory, for the raw material of the elixir, cinnabar is the best, followed by gold, silver, *Ganoderma* (諸芝), mica (雲母), and so on ([Ge 1985](#), p. 196). From this point of view, medicines made of gold and stones are better than herbal because vegetation is perishable, while gold and stones are stronger, so using gold and stones as medicine can prolong life. Furthermore, Ge Hong believes, by burning the gold longer, the change will be better, yet the gold will never disappear. Natural gold can be indefinitely smelted without changing its properties, but artificially refined gold is even better because it is the “essence of all medicines” (諸藥之精) ([Ge 1985](#), p. 286). Therefore, the artificially refined golden elixir (金丹) obtained through the smelting process becomes the key to immortality ([Ge 1985](#), p. 71).

Taoist alchemy is a complex and obscure process. But Mr. Chen Guofu (陳國符, 1914–2000), a well-known contemporary Taoist researcher and chemist, clearly explained the complicated process for us: the method of making golden elixir must be refined by flying (飛煉). The so-called flying means simple sublimation, or the number of objects heated to high temperature, and at the same time, the products can be sublimated. The final product of this process was yellow in color and was considered to be the same as real gold from the

Han Dynasty to the Jin Dynasty. In the early Tang Dynasty, people called this kind of gold “medicine gold” (藥金), and they already knew the difference between medicine gold and real gold (Chen 2014, p. 357; 1992). Before the Jin Dynasty, the main components of the so-called “golden elixir” were mercury sulfide and arsenic sulfide, and the basic principle of the mysterious external alchemy was to first dissolve the ore in mercury to obtain amalgam, and then volatilize the mercury by heating to separate the precious metal. Sometimes this kind of product does contain real gold, but it does not come from magical alchemy as the alchemists think because the mined ore raw material itself contains gold, and the so-called smelting is actually a process of further purification.

From today’s point of view, external alchemy is based on a wrong theory of element transformation, but traditional alchemists regard “turning stone into gold” (點石成金) as a real and feasible operation. However, the fundamental purpose of making a golden elixir is obviously not limited to obtaining gold. As Ge Hong’s teacher Zheng Yin (鄭隱) said, “A real person makes gold elixir in order to swallow it and become immortal, not to get rich” (真人作金, 自欲餌服之致神仙, 不以致富也) (Ge 1985, p. 286). Therefore, Taoist external alchemy reached its peak in the Tang Dynasty (Schipper and Franciscus 2004, pp. 377–413), and under its influence, many emperors took elixirs (Zhao 2009, pp. 337–39). However, due to the toxicity of the ingredients in the elixir, the result is just like a famous anonymous ancient poem in the Han Dynasty: “Taking golden elixir to seek immortals, but most of them are mistaken by it” (服食求神仙, 多為藥所誤). Therefore, the external alchemy tended to decline after the Song Dynasty, and then transformed into the inner alchemy (內丹). In this context, the external alchemy gradually separated from its original intention, no longer “to be immortal”, but mostly “to get rich”. Indeed, those who pursued immortality actually died young, while those studying alchemy may have obtained huge wealth. So, the direction of development naturally turned to money as a goal (Chen 2014, p. 375). But this change does not mean the demise of the traditional way of external alchemy. In fact, as a pursuit of eternal life, it has always been continuous in the context of Chinese history and culture.

Even in the Ming Dynasty, literati at that time often mentioned the extensive influence of alchemy among the people in their books. Xie Zhaozhe (謝肇淛, 1567–1624), a native of Zhejiang (浙江) Province, once bluntly criticized Taoism, saying that those who are addicted to Taoism in the world are all vainly trying to become immortals, or coveting gold and silver for the sake of profitability, and that they have no thoughts at all, so there is no need to debate with them (Xie 2021, p. 273). While the art of alchemy has declined in popularity because of its lack of proof of immortality, it has always encouraged greed for wealth. People often believe that alchemists do have a mysterious way of “turning stone into gold”, and that once they have mastered it, they will be able to enjoy wealth and prosperity. As a result of this, people often fall into this path, either explicitly or implicitly, or even intentionally falsify it to commit fraud. Huang Xingzeng (黃省曾, 1496–1546), a literatus of Jiangsu (江蘇) Province, pointed out in his comment on the customs of Wu (another name of the city Suzhou 蘇州) that the people of Wu like to talk about the art of immortals. Although they talk about it fiercely, none of them succeed in the end. The most shameless thing is to make fake silver, which is called Maoyin (茅銀), and used to deceive buyers (Huang 2002, p. 789). The famous scholar and scientist Song Yingxing (宋應星, 1587–c.1666) also specifically exposed in his masterpiece *Tian Gong Kai Wu* (天工開物) that hypocritical alchemists use cinnabar silver to confuse people. Their alleged method was to put lead, cinnabar, and silver in the same proportion into a jar and sealing it; after three weeks, the cinnabar absorbed the properties of silver and became a treasure (Song 2002, p. 107).

All these obsessions with alchemy reflect the social atmosphere of the moment, and also show that the legend of alchemy has long been deeply rooted in the hearts of the people and has become a hidden cultural psychology of the Chinese<sup>2</sup>. Throughout China’s long history, although exoteric elixir has gradually proved to be a failed attempt at immortality, its adjunct, the legendary technique of turning stone into gold, has continued to

attract followers. As we will discuss, this intrinsic passion for alchemy influenced the thinking and actions of some Chinese. Therefore, when Catholic missionaries came to China in the late Ming Dynasty, the Chinese were greatly interested in knowing their financial resources, and they naturally projected the traditional imagination of alchemy onto the missionaries. Some of the Chinese who came into contact with the missionaries at that time had a secret motive in their hearts to confirm the existence of alchemy from the missionaries, and were trying in vain to acquire this method. It is important to note the reasons why some Chinese stubbornly believed that the missionaries had mastered alchemy, on the one hand, from the lifestyle that the missionaries in China presented to the Chinese, and on the other hand, from the fact that Westerners were purchasing large quantities of mercury along the coasts of China, which was a key element in traditional Taoist alchemy. Understanding the process of traditional Taoist alchemy and the important role that mercury played in it, it is not difficult to understand the Chinese imagination.

### 3. Chinese People's Alchemical Imagination about Missionaries

In the early stage of his entrance in China, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) appeared in front of the Chinese with the Buddhist cassock. Thirteen years later, in 1595, Ricci replaced the Buddhist cassock with Confucian clothing, thus transforming himself from the original “foreign monk” (番僧) to the “Western confucian” (西儒) known to later generations. In this process, the person who played a key role was Qu Rukui (瞿汝夔, 太素 Taisu). Qu was the son of Qu Jingchun (瞿景淳), President of the Ministry of Rites in Nanjing (南京禮部尚書), and was expelled from his family because of his “adultery by sending messages” (通問之奸) with his sister-in-law (see Huang 2005, pp. 33–62). In his letter, Ricci mentioned cryptically that Qu could not live at home for some reason, so he traveled around China (Ricci 2018, p. 172). Qu later became an important figure in Ricci's circle of friends in China. Not only was he the first Chinese to follow Ricci's systematic study of Western studies, but he also utilized his extensive connections to recommend Ricci to the social elites of the time, thus laying the foundation for Ricci's missionary work in China. More significantly, Qu persuaded Ricci to put on Confucian clothing, thus realizing a fundamental shift in missionary strategy (see Aleni 2002, p. 203). However, before Qu converted to Catholicism, he had a passion for Buddhism and alchemy. When he first met Ricci, he heard that Ricci knew how to make silver, so he took Ricci as his teacher according to Chinese etiquette. However, he gradually realized that what Ricci taught him was not what he thought, but a higher science, and from then on, he had a love affair with Western learning (Ricci 2014, p. 161; Hsia 2010, pp. 121–22)<sup>3</sup>.

The reason why Qu Rui Kui heard that Ricci mastered alchemy is that few people at the time knew the actual source of his funding, and it seems that only legendary alchemy would make sense. However, to understand the deeper basis of this rumor, it should be combined with Ricci's way of life in China. From the very beginning of his stay in China, Ricci opened up social contacts with frequent gifts, such as prisms, chime clocks, and various gemstones, which were all valuable curiosities in the eyes of the Chinese at the time. With the experience of socializing in China, Ricci also learned that in order to make some achievements in his missionary career, he must be well-dressed and dignified (Ricci 2018, p. 169). Therefore, during his stay in Nanjing, Ricci made all his servants wear long gowns, and when he went out, he always took a sedan chair that let others carry him on their shoulders. Furthermore, at least three sedan chairs were used, one for Ricci, and the other two for his clothes and stationery (Ricci 2018, p. 170). In this way, Ricci created a decent social image of himself and successfully integrated himself into the circle of friends of the upper elite. In addition to the costs of such courtesies and daily necessities, there was also a considerable amount of money spent on buying land and building a church, having books engraved, and spreading money to help others, which was the financial basis for the image and activities of Ricci and other missionaries in China.

What kind of impression does the lifestyle of Ricci leave in the eyes of the Chinese? The records of people at that time can reveal their psychology. Fei Yuanlu (費元祿, 1575–

1640), a literatus of Jiangxi (江西) Province, had contacts with Ricci in Nanchang (南昌). He observed that Ricci hired Chinese wherever he went, and the daily expenses were quite a lot. Therefore, Fei was very puzzled about the source of Ricci's funds. One day, he personally visited Ricci's residence. He described Ricci's room as very elegant, but only the bedroom was closed all day, so he guessed Ricci was familiar with alchemy (Fei 1997, p. 663). Shen Defu (沈德符, 1578–1642) also recorded that Ricci had a good appetite for food and made exquisite things, he never engaged in business, but he lived a good life every day and never felt embarrassed, so Ricci was suspected that he actually knew alchemy (Shen 2002, p. 695). In addition to daily necessities, people at that time also observed that Ricci often donated money to others. For example, Zhu Huaiwu (朱懷吳) said that Ricci did not care about housing and food, but he never lacked daily funds. Every time Ricci bought medicine from the market, he gave it to others in just one day, so it was rumored that he had mastered alchemy (Tang 2017, p. 25). Coincidentally, Liu Kanzhi (劉戡之) also described that Ricci was proficient in numerology and secretly mastered alchemy, so whenever he went to a place, he generously gave money to others (Tang 2017, p. 418). When the famous writer Yuan Zhongdao (袁中道, 1570–1623) learned of Ricci's death from the official reports (邸報), he commented that "Matteo Ricci was good at talking and writing. His income was very meager, but he often donated the money to others. His house was large and there were many servants, so it was rumored that he had mastered the method of alchemy" (Yuan 2002, p. 258). The records of these literati show that the Chinese at that time generally noticed that Ricci lived a good life and behaved generously, so they highly suspected that he had mastered alchemy. Therefore, it is not surprising that Yao Lv (姚旅, 1572–1623) claimed that Ricci was not only good at astronomy, but also good at alchemy (Yao 2002, p. 670).

The imagination that Ricci mastered the secret art of alchemy almost accompanied his entire history in China, and this imagination was mixed with other colorful imaginations, almost turning Ricci into a magician with great powers<sup>4</sup>. However, Ricci has long been aware of the alchemical imagination. He noticed that the pursuit of alchemy and immortality is very common in China, and as far as alchemy is concerned, it is especially popular in Nanchang (Ricci 2014, pp. 65–66)<sup>5</sup>. Ricci described that the whole city of Nanchang was obsessed with silver refining, and many people lost their fortunes because of it. There were even rumors that he was an expert in this field and could refine silver as he wished, so many people tried their best to ask him to teach this technology (Ricci 2018, p. 176). Ricci knew very well that the reason behind this imagination was that they did not know the source of his funds. Xu Shijin (徐時進, 1549–1632) once met Ricci in Nanjing, and he recorded the following:

He [Ricci] always sat in a sedan chair when he went in and out, followed by servants, and his appearance was very elegant. He has been away from his homeland for many years, and his wallet should have gradually become empty, but he behaves humbly and there is no one else around him. People suspected that he mastered alchemy, but after I peeked into his room, I didn't find the furnace. I asked him, and he said that many people of their community would travel to Fo lang ji (佛郎機)<sup>6</sup>, and people from Fo lang ji would come to Guangdong (廣東) occasionally, and they could be asked to bring money. The people in their country take promises seriously, and they make an agreement before coming here, so they will definitely not embarrass people from other places. Those who acted as messengers would return to Fo lang ji again and bring the reply back. He also said that opals were produced in his country, and he didn't know that Chinese cherished it so that the price was so expensive; it was a pity that he didn't bring some in exchange for some money. Obviously, the rumor that he has mastered alchemy is a misunderstanding.

[利瑪竇] 出入肩輿，隨僮僕，冠劍甚都。去國既久，囊應垂，又恭謹無旁人。人乃疑其有黃白術，而矚室中，無爐鼎。余問之，云其社中人多遊佛郎機國，佛郎機國時有往來粵東者，從彼卻寄。國人最重然諾，其來已有約，必不令窘於四方。

而其為鴻者，必當再至佛郎機，有復焉。又言國產貓精，初不知中國珍重價翔若此，不及賚給資用以為恨。則謂能黃白者誤也。(Tang 2017, pp. 12–13)

Although Ricci explained the source of his funds to the Chinese many times, he was not always able to convince. Fang Hongjing (方弘靜, 1517–1611) recorded that Ricci once went from Zhejiang to Nanjing to buy a house, and he refused the money someone offered him, but he did not fall into poverty because of this. Therefore, Fang suspected that Ricci had mastered alchemy. But he observed Ricci nearby and did not see anything unusual. Ricci explained to him that the people of his country did business with Fo lang ji and asked them to help bring the money. However, Fang is still skeptical about this, because Fo lang ji is very far away from Nanjing, and it seems impossible to be so punctual. But Fang also explained that people who had close contacts with Ricci said that he was very honest and cautious, not like a person who would deceive people (Fang 2002, p. 371).

The reason why the Chinese may not believe Ricci's explanation is not only subjective, but also has an objective background is that the people learned that the Europeans were purchasing large quantities of mercury on the southeastern coast. In traditional Taoist alchemy, mercury was the key to refining gold and silver and making the "golden elixir". Li Shizhen (李時珍, 1518–1593), a great medical scientist in the Ming Dynasty, also pointed out that alchemists used mercury and three fats of cattle, sheep, and pigs to make ointment, and used *Medulla Tetrapanacis* (通草) as the medium for burning fire, and then could find gold, silver, copper, iron, lead, jade, tortoise, snake, and monster, so it is called "magical liquid" (靈液) (Li 1983, p. 643). It is probably because of the various wonderful uses of mercury that the Chinese were convinced that the missionaries had mastered the secret art of alchemy, as Ricci said the following:

Many people in China fanatically believe that mercury can be smelted into real silver with a kind of grass, but it is said that this kind of grass does not exist in China. It grows in a foreign country and is still brought into China by priests. They are convinced that the priests have the grass and use it to make real silver. The reason is very simple. They saw that the Portuguese bought mercury in large quantities from Guangzhou every year and shipped it to Japan and India, which did not produce mercury, and then returned with a full load of real silver. It is impossible to imagine any other way to obtain so much silver except by refining real silver with mercury. In addition, they saw that the priests in China never took alms, did not have other occupations, and did not engage in business, but they still could maintain a decent life. (Ricci 2014, p. 124)<sup>7</sup>

Ricci's account reveals something crucial in the Chinese alchemical imagination, namely, that the Chinese of the time were keenly aware of the close connection between the large quantities of mercury purchased from China, as well as the large quantities of silver repatriated from abroad, and the decent life of the missionaries in China. Clearly, mercury was a key element in strengthening the Chinese alchemical imagination. According to the traditional external alchemy, using mercury, one can "turn stone into gold". However, the fact is that mercury acts as a refiner rather than a material transformer. In fact, Europeans bought large quantities of mercury because they used the amalgamation method in silver mining, and it was the refining effect of mercury that was utilized, thus allowing huge amounts of silver mined in the Americas and Japan to flow into China through trade. The Chinese, who did not know what was going on at the time, had an ancient alchemical imagination, which they projected onto missionaries such as Ricci<sup>8</sup>. It could even be said that this alchemical imagination kept circulating for quite a long time after Ricci. For example, the historian Tan Qian (談遷, 1594–1658) visited the Catholic Church near Xuanwu Gate (宣武門) in Beijing after the Ming Dynasty had collapsed, and he visited Johann Adam Schall von Bell (湯若望, 1591–1666). Tan described that Schall had a wide variety of books on his bookshelf, including books on medicine and science, and there were also two secret books on alchemy, which a high-ranking official named Chen Mingxia (陳名夏, ?–1654) tried to obtain but failed (Tan 2002, p. 355)<sup>9</sup>. Tan's observation of Schall's bookshelf can be

described as an interesting metaphor. In other words, one can imagine the surprise of the Chinese that a foreigner with a very different face, claiming to be from the strange Western world, mastered knowledge of medicine, mathematics, geometry, geography, astronomy, and so on, all of which were unfamiliar to the Chinese. In the minds of the ordinary Chinese, such a vast and new system of knowledge would have created an image of the missionaries as magicians of great power, and it is not surprising that the Chinese thought that they must have mastered the mysterious art of alchemy as well.

#### 4. Funding Sources of Missionaries in China and Their Troubles

In the early days of the late Ming Jesuits in China, their appearances, speech, and behaviors, as well as exotic objects, aroused great interest among the Chinese people. In the face of frequent questions from visitors, the Jesuits gradually learned and formed a relatively fixed way of responding to them. Generally speaking, questions of interest to the Chinese were often related to their daily lives and customs, and the Jesuits in China responded to this curiosity by publishing books such as *Zhi Fang Wai Ji* (職方外紀), *Xi Fang Da Wen* (西方答問), and *Xi Fang Yao Ji* (西方要紀). An early document that provides insight into the context of this dialogue is the rare text *Bai Ke Wen Da* (拜客問答), which may have been compiled by Ricci around 1602 (see Hsia 2010, pp. 212–14)<sup>10</sup>. This text was probably a study manual to guide the newly arrived missionaries, not only to master the Chinese language, but also to learn Chinese social etiquette. The question-and-answer format of the text suggests that this type of questioning was something that missionaries faced regularly in their daily lives, and one passage is quite noteworthy:

Q: “Old gentleman, you have been here for twenty years<sup>11</sup>, and the expenses are also high. Where did the money come from?”

A: “It is from our country. Once every two or three years, a friend of our group sends it.”

Q: “After so many years, does anyone still send silver?”

A: “There is no time when it is not sent, and there is no time when it is not delivered.”

Q: “Who does your friend entrust to send this silver?”

A: “Ships from Xiao xi yang (小西洋, India) go to Guangdong every year, and a merchant is entrusted to bring the silver, and we send people to get it.”

Q: “What if the merchant’s ship was wrecked?”

(A): “Even if our silver and his silver are gone, he will borrow money and send it here when he goes to Guangdong.”

Q: “People in your country have this rare friendship, which is very different from ours. It is very rare for us here to trust people with money.”

Q: “How much silver do they send at a time?”

A: “They send enough.”

Q: “I heard that you have a secret magic method. Others don’t know where your living expenses come from, so there are rumors.”

A: “I have never believed in this method, and I am afraid that no one in the world can do it. Even if such a method existed, my friends and I would not take such a thing seriously.”

問：「老先生到了這邊二十年，費用亦大，是那裏來的？」

答：「是敝國來的。兩三年一次，同會之朋友寄來。」

問：「這許多年，還有人寄銀子來麼？」

答：「沒有不寄，沒有不送。」

問：「貴友托甚麼人寄這個銀子？」

答：「小西洋的船，年年到廣東，銀子托一個商人帶，我們差人去取。」

問：「那個商人設或沈弱（溺），怎麼處？」

答：「就是我們的銀子與他的銀子都沒有了，到廣東必竟借貸銀子送到這來。」

問：「貴處的人有這高情，比我這邊大不同了。我們這邊可托銀子之人難得。」

問：「一次寄多少？」

答：「寄勾（夠）用。」

問：「聞老先生有個秘密的妙法，人見家裏費用不知所從來，所以有這個說。」

答：「學生從來不信有這個法，恐怕普天下沒有人做得來。就是有這個法，學生與敝友不重這樣的事。」 (Anonymous Bai Ke Wen Da, BnF, Chinois 7024 n.d., pp. 55–57)

The questioner and answerer set in this text are obviously a Chinese person and a missionary. The content of the dialogue shows that the Chinese are particularly interested in the source of money for the missionary. It is also revealed that there are rumors that missionary have a “secret magic method”, which actually refers to external alchemy. In another conversation, this speculation is even more apparent:

Q: “Where did all this silver come from?”

A: “It all comes from mines, not from refining.”

Q: “Why did the merchants who came to Guangdong buy so much mercury?”

A: “The gold and silver that have just been mined from the mine are together with the soil, and cannot be separated without mercury, so mercury is needed.”

問：「這許多銀子是那裏來的？」

答：「都是礦裏出來，不是煉的。」

問：「來廣東商人買這許多水銀做甚麼緣故？」

答：「礦裏新取的金銀與在土（土在）一塊，不用水銀分別不來，所以要買水銀。」

(Anonymous Bai Ke Wen Da, BnF, Chinois 7024 n.d., pp. 58–59)

Obviously, the questioner learned that the merchants who came to China purchased mercury in Guangdong, and then suspected that the silver of the missionaries came from alchemy. This also proves that Ricci’s observations about the Chinese people are correct, and the explanation here can be regarded as a response to the folk rumors. A similar response apparently continued for years within the missionaries. For example, in the “Nanjing Missionary Case” (南京教案) in 1616, Diego de Pantoja (龐迪我, 1571–618) and others still had to defend various rumors attached to them, including alchemy. Pantoja clarified that there is no such thing as alchemy in the world; although the learned researchers in the West have repeatedly studied this issue, they finally believe that alchemy does not exist. Regarding those rumors that missionaries mastered alchemy and kept it secretly, Pantoja argued that if missionaries could use alchemy to refine silver by themselves, why should they rely on others to send silver from far away? If the missionaries’ interest is alchemy and they can do it by themselves, why should they take risks and suffer (de Pantoja 2017, pp. 268–69)?

Sheng Shui Ji Yan (聖水紀言) is a text recorded by Sun Xueshi (孫學詩) which refutes rumors and mistaken ideas about the missionaries and their teaching, including Lord of Heaven, celibacy, and Buddhism, as well as alchemy. In one of the dialogues, the questioner shows great interest in the source of funds of the missionaries, and the respondent, Yang Tingyun (楊廷筠, 1557–1627), endeavors to explain the reality behind this suspicion. Yang explains that each missionary has a fixed amount of living expenses every year, which is the so-called “daily food” (日用糧), and was sent from India by their friends of the same religious order in their own country, and India entrusted someone to send it to Guangdong. Since people in their country value credit, the annual fee is constant (Sun 2002, p. 26). Yang also explains that whenever there was a shortage of supplies due to the shipwreck of Western ships, the missionaries had to scrimp and save to cope with the situation. In this case, the missionaries in Hangzhou relied on Yang’s support, while those in Shanghai relied on

Xu Guangqi's. It is clear that Yang Tingyun's explanation is an attempt to clarify the rumors and misunderstandings about alchemy by using his own experience and reputation.

Moreover, in 1637, Giulio Aleni (艾儒略, 1582–1649) published his book *Xi Fang Da Wen* (西方答問) in Fujian (福建). In this book, Aleni once again gave a clear explanation of the rumored alchemy and funding:

Q: "You and the sages of your country came to teach from afar, and you neither accepted the official position of the court, nor accepted the gifts from your disciples. In most cases, you received less and gave more in interpersonal communication. There is no profit from industry and trade, but for decades you have never lacked money to pay expenses. Where did the money come from? There are rumors that you must have a magic method, so the money will not run out. Is it true?"

A: "Has alchemy ever worked? Profit-making people have been trying to do this for many reasons, but the result often leads to poverty. The rumors that we have this method are all speculations of strangers, but this is not the case. All our daily necessities are sent from our own country."

Q: "Your country is 90,000 miles away from China, which is not considered close. The journey of three years cannot be said to be short. How is it possible to keep it like this every year?"

A: "Every year, there are ships from our place trading in India, and every year, there are western merchants from India trading in the eastern part of Guangdong, so they will send the money here when it is convenient to them. Our friends live in different places so the money is passed to the various provincial capitals. If a ship does not arrive, they will have to borrow money from their acquaintances, and will be compensated when the ship arrives, which is common knowledge among comrades."

問曰：「貴邦諸賢，遠來行教，既不受朝廷官職，又不受弟子贄禮，且交際物儀，多薄來而厚往。無有產業貿易之利，乃用費數十年間未嘗缺乏，不知何從？議者曰：必有點化妙法，故久而不竭也。是果然否？」

答曰：「黃白之術，從來何曾有效？故好利之徒百端圖之，常見其窮。謂我輩有此法者，皆未相識之猜，實則不然。所用日需，原皆出於敝邦寄來者也。」

問：「貴邦離中華九萬裏，不為近也；三年路程，不為不久也，何能歷年如是？」

曰：「敝地每年有海舶過小西（洋）交易，小西（洋）每年復有西商交粵東，因便相寄此中。敝會諸友居不一處，相接相送於各省會間。若海舶不至，不免向知己借貸，舟至乃補償之，此同志者共知也。」 (Aleni 2014, pp. 174–76)

It is also worth mentioning that Lin Guangyuan (林光元), a catholic from Putian (莆田) of Fujian Province, once wrote a short monograph called *Dian Jin Shuo* (點金說, 1630–1640) to respond to the doubts of the outsider world: after the Western missionaries entered China, there was no shortage of food and money for daily use. Did they really master alchemy? Otherwise, how could they spend so much money and not lack it (Lin 2009, p. 49). However, the focus of *Dian Jin Shuo* is not to respond to the silver in alchemy that secular people like to talk about. The alchemy that Lin wants to discuss is from a moral and religious point of view. He adjusts the focus of people's attention and instead emphasizes the enlightenment of the Catholic faith on human nature, such as "turn greed into integrity" (點黷為廉), "turn lust into chastity" (點欲為貞), "turn cunning into simplicity" (點譎為淳), and so on, so his discourse has a strong theological connotation.

What is clear at this point is that the Chinese of the Ming and Qing dynasties were quite interested in the sources of funding for the missionaries, and the alchemical imagination was quite popular, and was consistently explained and responded to by the ecclesiastical community. As the missionaries have clarified, the source of funding itself is not mysterious, but comes mainly from an annual supplement from overseas, sometimes from the offerings and donations of Chinese parishioners, and sometimes from borrowing. But

Chinese observations also revealed a global historical context in which Westerners once purchased large quantities of mercury off the southeastern coast of China, shipped it to the Americas, Japan, and India to be mined, and then shipped the silver back to their home countries or to Southeast Asia in exchange for the best-selling goods they needed.

Silver, as an important binder for the global economy, was mainly produced in the Americas and Japan at that time, with Portugal and Spain as the main exporters and China as the main importer (see Liang 2008; Frank 1998). In the late Ming Dynasty, Portuguese silver was traded directly with China, mainly in Macau, which became a transit point for Jesuits, very important due to the *patronatus missionum*. Spanish silver was mainly imported through Luzon (呂宋). Luzon was already rich in silver, and Western silver was also imported into it for commerce. Therefore, many merchants from Fujian and Guangdong carried out business in Luzon to obtain silver. In the “Petition for the Opening of the Sea Ban” (請開海禁疏), He Qiaoyuan (何喬遠, 1558–1632), a famous politician and scholar of the Late Ming Dynasty, had once categorized foreign countries into the Western and Eastern Oceans and described some of their respective national conditions. However, in He’s description, the Western Ocean did not refer to Europe in the modern sense, but to countries such as Siam and Cambodia, which were rich in pepper, rhinoceros horn, and other items needed by China. In the Eastern Ocean, there was Luzon, whose barbarians were also the Fo lang ji, and whose country had many silver mountains producing silver, which was used for casting as silver coins. If the Chinese traded goods with the West, they exchanged them for the goods they produced, but if they traded with Luzon, they only obtained the silver (He 2015, p. 675). Since Luzon had few commodities to offer for the Chinese market, silver was eventually imported into China through the Chinese merchants of Fujian and Guangdong.

The funding of missionaries in China is of course part of global history. According to the consistent explanation of the missionaries, their funds were usually first brought to India by merchant ships commissioned by the European churches, then transferred to Macao, and then sent to the Chinese mainland for distribution to the churches there. In the “Nanjing Missionary Case”, Alfonso Vagnone (王豐肅, 1566–1640) confessed that the funds were sent by merchants from Macao, then forwarded to João da Rocha (羅儒望, 1565–1623), who then sent them to the Chinese mainland, and this was basically the process every year (Xu 2013, pp. 1726–27). The confession also revealed that the amount of silver brought to Macau by Western merchant ships was about 600 taels of silver per year, which was increased to 1000 taels if a church was to be built (Xu 2013, pp. 1708–9).

The question of the source of funding for the missionaries in China was not simplified by the fact that they clarified that they were not alchemists. The disclosure by the missionaries of the secrets of their sources of funding, while dispelling some of the folk rumors about alchemy, would have aroused another kind of political suspicion of a far more serious nature and consequence than the alchemical conjecture. From an official point of view, Vagnone’s practice of giving silver to converts is actually “a pretense of using relief to attract followers” (假周濟為招來) (Xu 2013, pp. 1710–11). In addition, Vagnone spent a lot of money to buy land, which is nothing more than taking advantage of the greedy nature of human beings, and can make greedy people be attracted by his money, which is essentially an act of “buying people’s hearts” (要結人心) (Tang 2017, p. 222). For the same reason, Yang Tingyun was warned that his protection of the missionaries was extremely dangerous, for it was rumored that the missionaries did not come from so-called Europe, but were used by the Japanese as guides to buy people’s hearts for other purposes (Sun 2002, p. 27). Later, Yang Guangxian (楊光先, 1597–1669), a famous radical anti-Catholic in the early Qing dynasty, also criticized the missionaries for publishing books which often plagiarized Chinese language and covered up their absurd theories. The reason for this, he argued, was precisely because the Catholic Church was rich and it was easy for the missionaries to recruit those downtrodden Chinese literati to embellish their books (Yang 2000, pp. 21–22).

The wealth of the Catholic Church was probably one of the deepest impressions the Chinese had of the missionaries during the Ming and Qing dynasties. But behind the wealth was the question of the source of money, which led to two conjectures: one was that the missionaries had mastered the secret art of alchemy and could make silver at will; the other was that the missionaries were secret agents assigned by foreigners to infiltrate into the Chinese mainland to buy people's hearts and minds. These two conjectures actually coexisted and intertwined with each other in the missionary history of the Ming and Qing dynasties, with the former being a popular rumor and the latter more representative of the official attitude. For example, during the "Nanjing Missionary Case", the anti-Catholic Wen Xiangfeng (文翔鳳, 1577–1642) suspected that Ricci was a spy sent by a foreign country near Guangdong to spy on China, as he was never short of money and goods that were automatically shipped to the provinces in a steady stream (Wen 1997, p. 484). He Zongyan (何宗彥, 1559–1624) also alleged that Ricci was a specially selected spy who learned the Chinese language, read Chinese books, and snooped around for information from Guangdong to Zhejiang and Nanjing before entering Beijing. What made He even more indignant was that Ricci utilized alchemy, squandered his money, and made a wide range of friends, thus confusing many literati and scholars (Tang 2017, p. 217). Another famous anti-Catholic, Xu Dashou (許大受), also heard rumors about the missionaries' mastery of alchemy, but he was also skeptical of the missionaries' explanation of their motives for spontaneously carrying silver to save souls, which, in his view, was still a practice of attracting believers with money (Xu 2013, p. 1807). Judging from the official nature of these views, these critics' political concerns about the state may be genuine. They probably never believed them, and there was little need for them to take the rumor seriously that the missionaries were proficient in alchemy because, whatever its truth, it posed no great danger. These critics seem less inclined to believe in the existence of purely religious motives on the part of the missionaries than in the rumors of alchemy, and are more inclined to believe that there must be nefarious schemes lurking behind the missionaries' religious activities, and that this is more of a real and imminent threat to national security.

In this respect, the interpretation of the question of the source of funds, whether from alchemy or imported from abroad, would place the missionaries in a difficult position. Ricci had already felt this embarrassment during his lifetime. Ricci claimed in a letter in 1609 that nowadays the Chinese no longer inquired daily as to the origin of their money, but he had heard that some of his friends preferred to convince the people that the missionaries were really making real silver out of mercury, instead of saying that their silver was coming from abroad, in order to avoid the kind of suspicions and accusations that were more potentially risky (Ricci 2018, pp. 334–35). In the social context of the time, the rumors of alchemy, although a misconception and detrimental to the image of the missionaries, were generally harmless, while the claims of collusion with foreign countries, buying people's hearts, and plotting rebellion were strong political accusations, implying a high political and life risk.

## 5. Conclusions

The Chinese imagination of Catholic alchemy during the Ming and Qing dynasties was essentially based on the observation of the external behaviors of the missionaries rather than on a misinterpretation of their internal teachings. This image was influenced by the Taoist alchemical tradition of China, but also by the lifestyle and activities of the missionaries themselves. As Jonathan D. Spence has pointed out, Ricci's own attitudes actually contributed to the alchemical speculation about him, as he was not only actively involved in technical experiments and the making of a scientific apparatus, but he was also reticent to discuss financial matters. More than this, Ricci might even have hinted that he possessed special powers (Spence 1984, p. 186). What must not be overlooked in this imaginative process is the power of popular rumor, which, on the one hand, enlarges the social influence of the missionaries themselves and attracts interest in Catholicism, but on the other hand, information may be distorted in the process of dissemination, thus triggering all sorts of

unrealistic conjectures or fears. As Père Francois Xavier d'Entrecolles (殷弘緒, 1664–1741) explained in his letter of 1715 in Raozhou (饒州), there were rumors of missionaries gouging out people's eyes to make eyeglasses or refining silver, and there were even people who were tempted by the rumors of alchemy and came into contact with the church and were eventually baptized (Du Halde 2005, pp. 150–51). Although the rumors of alchemy are different from the witchcraft rumors about Christianity in modern Chinese society, the inner logic of the two, in terms of the curiosity or panic they arouse, is the same (See Ter Haar 2006, pp. 154–95).

The rich and varied Western knowledge imparted by the missionaries to China during the Ming and Qing dynasties opened up a new way of understanding the world for the Chinese at that time, and earned the missionaries a reputation for erudition, which led to the Chinese labeling them with different identity labels. However, this Western knowledge, which covered astronomy, geography, medicine, mathematics, philosophy, religion, and many other disciplines, was undoubtedly full of unknowns and puzzles for the Chinese at that time, thus taking on a mystical meaning. Many written records at that time also tell a lot of stories about the miracles of the missionaries, such as healing the sick, and casting out ghosts (see Zhang 1999). When these miracle stories are linked to the missionaries' Western intellectual backgrounds, it is not so difficult to understand why the Chinese would project alchemy imagery onto them.

Rumors of alchemy would seem to have been easily cleared up if only the missionaries had been willing to disclose their sources of funding to the Chinese. However, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Chinese empire had many defenses and precautions against potential dangers, both internal and external, and it was not easy for the missionaries to gain the trust of the Chinese on the issue of their source of funding. For example, Yang Tingyun had to explain that the rumors about the missionaries' alchemy were absurd, while at the same time using the missionaries' personalities as a guarantee that their connections with foreign countries would not pose a threat to China's national security (Sun 2002, pp. 25–29). On the question of the source of funding for the missionaries, the nature of the problem was revealed to be, on the one hand, the general curiosity and profit-seeking mentality of the Chinese people, and, on the other hand, the xenophobic panic and alertness of the officials towards the outside world. In the former case, the simple interaction of some Chinese with the missionaries may have been accompanied by a deeper fantasy in their minds that they wanted to learn alchemy from the missionaries. As for the latter, the official public opinion has repeatedly directed the question of the source of funds to the traditional theory of "barbarism" (夷夏論), a theory whose spiritual echo can easily be found in the history of modern nationalism. Even in modern times, the Chinese Christian Church has been disturbed by false rumors about missionaries that have caused social panic, and because of its complicated relations with foreign countries, it has been caught in the swamp of public opinion between imperialism and nationalism. Therefore, the Church in China could ultimately only break its political, economic, and ideological ties with foreign countries and establish the principles of "self-government" (自治), "self-support" (自養), and "self-propagation" (自傳) in order to gain political innocence and moral legitimacy for itself.

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## Notes

- 1 It should be noted that the financial resources of the Jesuits is another very complex issue and is not the focus of this paper. But some scholars have noted this interesting phenomenon of alchemy. Jonathan D. Spence pointed out in his book that many Chinese thought that Ricci had the secret of alchemy, and it can even be said that Ricci intentionally took advantage of this curiosity of the Chinese (see [Spence 1984](#), pp. 185–88). R. Po-chia Hsia mentions in his book that a Guangzhou Christian named Cai Yinong falsely claimed to be able to obtain alchemy from Michele Ruggieri, and used it as a means of deception, which led to Ruggieri's involvement in a lawsuit (see [Hsia 2010](#), pp. 103–5). He also describes Qu Taisu (瞿太素)'s enthusiasm for alchemy when he met Matteo Ricci (pp. 121–22), and the greedy eunuchs that Ricci met in Beijing who were also interested in alchemy (p. 173). And also, Liam Matthew Brockey mentions that a young Chinese called Lin had spent time studying alchemy before coming to see João Soeiro (see [Brockey 2007](#), p. 287). Tang Kaijian's article describes the main sources of funding for the missionaries in China and mentions some of the observations of the Chinese at that time (see [Tang 2001](#)). Moreover, in his collection of Chinese historical materials on Matteo Ricci, he has included some Chinese accounts of the alchemical imagination (see [Tang 2017](#)). Song Liming also wrote an article discussing the real motives of the official Liu Jiezhai (劉節齋) who expelled Ricci from Zhaoqing (肇慶), arguing that Liu tried to obtain alchemy from Ricci but failed (see [Song 2012](#)). It is also important to mention Cao Jin's article, in which the author discusses the complex relationship between Western religion, scientific technology, and silver, and how these factors ultimately influenced the adjustment of the Ming court's silver mining techniques and policies (see [Cao 2020](#)).
- 2 For example, Wu Jingzi (吳敬梓, 1701–1754) deliberately satirized the trick of deceiving people with alchemy in his famous classical novel *The Scholars* (Ru lin wai shi 儒林外史) ([Wu 2021](#), pp. 323–33).
- 3 Another well-known figure who may have also wanted to obtain alchemy from Ricci was Liu Jiwen (劉繼文), then governor of Guangdong and Guangxi. In 1589, Liu asked Ricci to leave Zhaoqing (肇慶) and he himself occupied Ricci's residence. According to Ricci, it was because Liu wanted to build his shrine and statue there (see [Ricci 2018](#), p. 84). However, after Ricci was expelled, there were soon rumors that he was expelled by Liu because he refused to teach him alchemy, but Ricci clearly denied such rumors (see [Ricci 2014](#), pp. 171–72). Song Liming still believes that Liu's obsession with alchemy is the actual secret behind his expulsion of Ricci (see [Song 2012](#)). However, according to the newly discovered historical material "Li'ma Biography" (利瑪傳) in the *Liu's Genealogy* (劉氏族譜), the reason why Ricci was expelled was Liu's consideration of military secrets (see [Tang 2017](#), p. 5).
- 4 For example, Li Rihua (李日華, 1565–1635) claimed that Ricci had miraculous magic that could resist all man-made harm, and was good at *qi* absorption and introspection (納氣內觀), so diseases and disasters will not happen to him (see [Li 1997](#), p. 14). In fact, besides the alchemical imagination, there are other imaginations, such as exorcising demons, giving birth to children, and curing diseases and so on (see [Wu 2012](#); [Zhang 1999](#)).
- 5 Regarding these two phenomena, Diego de Pantoja (龐迪我, 1571–1618) also had a similar description in his letter (see [de Pantoja 2017](#), p. 517).
- 6 Fo lang ji, sometimes called Fu lang ji (佛郎機), is the Chinese name for Portugal and Spain in the Ming Dynasty. This name comes from the transliteration of Franks, so the Chinese people also called their famous cannon the "Franks Cannon" (佛郎機炮). The Jesuit Giulio Aleni explained the origin of this name in his book *Zhi Fang Wai Ji* (職方外紀): "To the northeast of Spain (西把尼亞) is France (佛郎察)... Because this country is in Europe, Muslims collectively call Westerners Fu lang ji, and the Cannon also inherited this name (see [Aleni 1996](#), p. 82)." In fact, people in the Ming Dynasty were often wrong about the geographical knowledge of Europe. In the records of Fo lang ji in *History of the Ming Dynasty* (明史), it was mistakenly considered to be near Malacca (滿刺加) ([Zhang 1974](#), p. 8430; [1982](#); [Dai 1984](#)).
- 7 The "grass" mentioned by Ricci here is actually "ambergis" (龍涎香) (See [D'Elia 1942](#), p. 240). Zhu Houcong (朱厚燾, 1507–1567), Emperor Shizong (世宗) of the Ming Dynasty, was obsessed with external alchemy, and ambergis was the key raw material, so he urged various places to purchase it many times (see [Zhang 1974](#), pp. 1993–94). Therefore, some scholars believe that the scarcity of ambergis and the urgency of the court's demand for it made it a tool for the Portuguese to trade with the Ming officials at that time, and thus allowed the Portuguese to finally obtain the right to stay in Macau (see [Li 2007](#)).
- 8 However, Song Liming believes that the alchemical imagination of the Chinese may have been due to the magical luster of the prism (see [Song 2011](#), pp. 215–20).
- 9 Regarding Tan Qian's record of Schall, see Albert Chan's article ([Chan 1998](#)). Missionaries may indeed have brought books on alchemy to China, and there are still many books on alchemy in the Pei-Tang Library of Peking (see [Lazarist 2009](#), p. 1270). The Jesuits did not teach alchemy in their colleges in Europe, but some individual Jesuits developed a strong interest in alchemy, mostly from a philosophical point of view. They purchased works on alchemy and sometimes even engaged into experimentation. The German Jesuit Johann Terrentius Schreck (鄧玉函, 1576–1630) developed a strong interest in alchemy in Italy before joining the Jesuits, and he went abroad to understand other possible methods of alchemy. There is no evidence that he was in contact with Chinese alchemists, but he brought to China books on alchemy, and he is said to have died after having tested a new product on himself (see [Golvers 2021](#)).
- 10 The manuscripts of *Bai Ke Wen Da* mainly include BnF Chinois 7024, Borgia.Cinese.503, Vat. Estr. Or.14, the titles of these three manuscripts are *Bai Ke Wen Da* (拜客問答). Another manuscript Borgia.Cinese.316.2 is titled *Hui Ke Wen Da* (會客問答). These

four manuscripts use different phonetic transliteration systems, but the specific content is similar. There is another text in the French National Library (BnF) titled *Xin Lai Shen Fu Bai Ke Wen Da* (新來神父拜客問答) (Chinois 7046 IV), which has only nine pages, and the content is different from *Bai Ke Wen Da*. There are also two other texts similar to them: one titled *Pin ciu ven tà ssi gmì* (賓主問答辭意) which collected in the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus (Jap-Sin I, 198); another one titled *Bai Ke Xun Shi* (拜客訓示, *Instruction Pour les Visites de Mandarins*), which is preserved in the Archivo Histórico de la Provincia de Toledo de la Compañía de Jesús.

- <sup>11</sup> If we tend to believe that the author of this text is Matteo Ricci, then based on the time here, we can infer that this text was first written around 1602. One of the forms of evidence for why the author of this text is believed to be Ricci is that it is mentioned in the text that he often needs to go to the imperial palace to repair the chime clock.

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