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Bridging Cultures: A Comparative Study of Early Catholic Missionaries' Chinese Proverb Collections

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Abstract: For early Christian missionaries, Chinese proverbs were an invaluable resource for learning the language, understanding the culture, and carrying out religious evangelization. While existing research has predominantly focused on collections of Chinese proverbs by Protestant missionaries, Catholic missionaries' efforts in gathering Chinese proverbs preceded those of their Protestant counterparts and hold significant linguistic, historical, and cross-cultural value. This study begins by tracing the emergence of Catholic missionaries' interest in Chinese proverbs and then presents a comparative analysis of three representative collections compiled by Joseph de Prémare (1666–1736), Paul Perny (1818–1907), and Joseph Van Oost (1877–1939): Catholic missionaries from different orders and historical periods. It examines the compilation structures, purposes, Chinese proverbs selected, and interpretive approaches in their works, tracing the evolution of Catholic missionaries' Chinese proverb collections. The study interprets this evolution in relation to the Catholic Church's missionary strategies and the personal evangelization philosophies of the missionaries themselves. This research demonstrates the diverse cultural engagement practices of Catholic missionaries in China from the 18th to the early 20th century, offering new insights into the interaction between Catholicism and Chinese culture during this period.

Keywords: Catholic missionaries; Chinese proverb collections; cultural engagement; Joseph de Prémare; Paul Perny; Joseph Van Oost

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1. Introduction

A proverb is to speech what salt is to food. This Arabic proverb vividly illustrates the essential connection between proverbs, language, and the everyday lives of communities. As concise, wisdom-filled expressions widely circulated among the populace, proverbs reflect the worldview and value systems of specific cultural groups. In missionary work, proverbs have often been used as cultural symbols to bridge linguistic and cultural divides, facilitating religious understanding across different societies. Christian ministries have long recognized the value of proverbs in smaller languages, with many pioneering collections (Bailleul 2005; Christaller 1879; Houlder 1960; Johnson 1892) being gathered and published by Christian workers. For early Christian missionaries in China, Chinese proverbs served not only as linguistic tools for learning the language but also as important mediums for understanding Chinese culture and conveying religious teachings. By collecting, translating, and compiling these proverbs, missionaries provided concrete evidence of their engagement with Chinese culture.

Some scholars (Cui 2019; Yang 2023) have provided a brief introduction or simple listings of the efforts by early Christian missionaries in China to collect and translate Chinese proverbs. However, detailed studies of missionary proverb collections have primarily focused on those compiled by Protestant missionaries, particularly the two most comprehensive collections: *A Collection of Chinese Proverbs* (Scarborough 1875) by William Scarbor-

ough (1841–1894) and *The Proverbs and Common Sayings from the Chinese* (Smith 1888) by Arthur Henderson Smith (1845–1932), which have been the subjects of in-depth case studies (Bian 2023; Cao 2023; Cui 2019; Jing 2024; Yang 2023; Zhou 2020a). In contrast, scholarly attention to the proverb collection and translation efforts of Catholic missionaries in China has been relatively scattered and superficial. In fact, Catholic missionaries began collecting Chinese proverbs before their Protestant counterparts, and their collections demonstrate significant evolution across different historical periods. These collections not only reflect the cultural engagement of the Catholic Church in China but also hold substantial linguistic, historical, and cross-cultural value.

Our study focuses on a comparative analysis of three representative collections compiled by Joseph de Prémare (1666–1736), Paul Perny (1818–1907), and Joseph Van Oost (1877–1939): Catholic missionaries from different orders and historical periods. Unlike the collections of Protestant missionaries, which were primarily written in English, these Catholic missionaries' collections were composed in Latin or French. Several case studies have explored the lives and works of these three missionaries. Research on Joseph de Prémare includes contributions by Lundbœk (1991), Z. Li (2014), S. Li (2023), and Mungello (Mungello 2019), among others. Studies on Paul Perny have been conducted by Guo (Guo 2016; Guo and Zheng 2017), Nie (2018), and Lee-Lee and Trujillo-González (Lee-Lee and Trujillo-González 2019), while Heylen (2004) and Y. Li (2011) have examined the work of Joseph Van Oost. However, the existing research on their Chinese proverb collections (Z. Li 2014, pp. 179–81; Nie 2018, pp. 150–82; Zhou 2020b) has been either brief or descriptive. There is still a lack of both in-depth case studies and systematic analyses. This study aims to address this gap.

This paper first traces the origins of Catholic missionaries' interest in Chinese proverbs. It then provides an overview of the collections compiled by Joseph de Prémare, Paul Perny, and Joseph Van Oost, analyzing their compilations' structure and intended purpose. The study further examines the Chinese proverbs included in these collections, along with their interpretative methods, through a detailed comparative analysis. Building on this, we attempt to summarize the evolving characteristics of the Chinese proverb collections compiled by Catholic missionaries and explain these changes in relation to shifts in the Catholic Church's strategies in China over different historical periods, as well as the personal evangelization philosophies of the missionaries themselves. We finally summarize the invaluable contributions and significance of the Chinese proverb collections compiled by early Catholic missionaries.

Focusing on proverbs as a medium for cross-cultural interaction, this study highlights the diverse cultural engagement practices of Catholic missionaries in China from the 18th century to the early 20th century. It offers a distinctive perspective for exploring Sino-Western cultural exchanges and contributes to a deeper understanding of Catholic Sinology and the interaction between Catholicism and Chinese culture during this period. Additionally, this study sheds light on the dissemination of Chinese proverbs in the Western world, enhancing our knowledge of their historical transmission.

2. From "Great Tradition" to "Little Tradition": The Emergence of Early Catholic Missionaries' Interest in Chinese Proverbs

2.1. The Definition and Scope of Chinese Proverbs

There has long been scholarly debate regarding the definition and scope of proverbs. As Archer Taylor noted, "formulating a scientific definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking… no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial. (Taylor 1931, p. 3)". Aligning the definition of Chinese proverbs with that of Western proverbs is equally challenging. Rohsenow (2023, preface, p. xii) suggests that the closest equivalent to "proverb" in Chinese is the term *yanyu* (諺語), although this term encompasses a range of meanings and does not fully correspond to the Western definition.

While "proverb" is typically translated as *yanyu*, it is sometimes rendered as *suyu* (俗語, colloquial expressions). For example, in Paul Perny's *Proverbes Chinois*, the Chinese

title on the cover is *Zhongguo Suyu* (中國俗語, Chinese Colloquial Expressions). In Chinese academic discourse, there are also varying views on the definitions and scopes of *yanyu* and *suyu*. Some scholars consider *yanyu* to be a subcategory of *suyu*, while others view them as equivalent, and still others see them as distinct linguistic categories. In this paper, we adopt a relatively representative perspective: *yanyu* is a subcategory of *suyu*, with the latter encompassing *yanyu*, *xiehouyu* (歇後語, enigmatic folk similes or truncated), *guanyongyu* (慣用語, fixed expression; locution), and certain forms of *chengyu* (成語, fused phrase literary expressions).

Upon examining the collections of Chinese proverbs compiled by Western missionaries, it becomes clear that these missionaries did not attempt to define a scientific scope for Chinese proverbs. Their collections primarily consist of *yanyu*, but also include a significant number of *xiehouyu*, some *chengyu*, and even a few doggerels. Therefore, we believe that the proverbs collected by the missionaries more closely resemble what is referred to in Chinese as *suyu*. The common characteristic of these expressions is that they are popular, fixed phrases that were collectively created by the people[1] and widely circulated among the populace. In the Chinese context, these sayings stand in contrast to *geyan* (格言, maxims or aphorisms). In a narrow sense, *geyan* are serious admonitory phrases, often attributed to renowned figures or ancient sages such as Confucius or Laozi, or derived from classical texts (D. An 2020).

To better understand this distinction, we can apply Robert Redfield's concepts (Redfield 1956) of the "great tradition" and the "little tradition". Classical maxims represent the intellectual essence of philosophers and scholars, belonging to the "great tradition", which reflects elite culture. In contrast, the Chinese proverbs collected by missionaries fall under the "little tradition", representing folk culture and everyday life experiences. The growing interest of early Catholic missionaries in Chinese proverbs illustrates a shift from the "great tradition" to the "little tradition".

2.2. The Emergence of Catholic Missionaries' Interest in Chinese Proverbs (16th–18th Century)

Since the Jesuits first entered China in the latter half of the 16th century, Western Catholic missionaries, in addition to their evangelization activities, devoted themselves to observing and documenting various aspects of Chinese society, marking the beginning of what is known as the "missionary Sinology" phase (X. Zhang 2005). Early Catholic missionaries paid particular attention to ancient Chinese maxims and aphorisms. One of the earliest Chinese texts introduced to the West was *Mingxin Baojian* (明心寶鑒) (Hu 2023; Hu and Wang 2023; X. Zhang 2016), a collection of maxims that synthesizes Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist thought, encompassing the moral and self-cultivation principles of philosophers and sages from antiquity through the Ming dynasty. In the 17th century, Confucian classics such as the *Analects* (論語) were translated into Western languages multiple times. This was followed by the translation of other Confucian texts with aphoristic qualities, including the *Book of Rites* (禮記), the *Classic of Filial Piety* (孝經), and the *Classic of Poetry* (詩經) during the 18th century.

Catholic missionaries' interest in ancient Chinese maxims was largely driven by their attraction to the natural reason embodied in these sayings (Hu and Wang 2023). Furthermore, Jesuits like Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), who promoted the Confucian adaptation policy, naturally focused on Confucian classics as key subjects of their research and dissemination. Additionally, the rhetorical function of maxims had been highly valued in Western thought since Ancient Greece. During the early Christian and medieval periods, rhetoric became an important tool for spreading the Gospel (Meynard 2007). The Jesuits placed a particular emphasis on rhetoric, making it a required course for entry into the order (Mo 2022). When Western missionaries arrived in China, they also compiled collections of Western maxims and translated them into Chinese. For instance, the Italian Jesuit Alfonso Vagnone (1568–1640) compiled *Dadao Jiyan* (達道紀言, *Illustrations of the Grand Dao*). It can be said that the early translation and mutual exchange of maxims between China and the West, spearheaded by Catholic missionaries, facilitated the early collision and di-

alogue between Eastern and Western philosophical thought, and in many ways pioneered Sino-Western cultural exchange.

Although the early collections of maxims introduced by Catholic missionaries, such as *Mingxin Baojian*, contained a certain number of colloquial proverbs, the missionaries did not distinguish or specifically highlight them in their translations. The first Catholic missionary to explicitly propose the collection of Chinese proverbs was Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730), one of the "King's Mathematicians" sent by King Louis XIV of France. In the second volume of his Chinese work, *Gujin Jingtian Jian* (古今敬天鑒, *On the Heavenly Worship of the Ancient and Modern Chinese*)[2], Bouvet compiled 51 groups of sayings related to *Shangtian* (上天, Heaven), with each group centered on a specific topic and presenting three types of expressions side by side: "folk sayings" (民俗), "scholarly sayings" (士俗), and "canonical text" (經文). For example, under the topic the "Creation of Heaven and Earth" (造天地萬物), he listed the following:

> Folk saying: "What is not created by Heaven?" (什麼不是老天爺生的?);
>
> Scholarly saying: "Heaven creates all things" (天生萬物);
>
> Canonical texts (Confucian classic): "All things originate from Heaven" (萬物本於天).

Through this approach, Bouvet aimed to demonstrate the alignment between the Christian belief in the Creator and traditional Chinese concepts of "Heaven". As a key figure in the Figurist movement, which argued that Chinese classics contained hidden messages of Christian revelation, Bouvet believed that interpreting Chinese texts through a Christian lens could reshape Chinese beliefs. By showing the convergence of language across different social strata, he sought to legitimize Catholic doctrine within Chinese culture. This approach exemplified the Jesuit policy of "cultural adaptation", integrating Catholic teachings into Chinese classics to foster acceptance among Chinese readers.

However, it is worth noting that some of the "folk sayings" that Bouvet listed do not, in the conventional sense, qualify as proverbs. Conversely, some expressions categorized as "scholarly sayings", such as "Good and evil are repaid by Heaven" (善惡自有天報) and "Man proposes, Heaven disposes" (人在做，天在看), are now often regarded as typical proverbs. This suggests that these proverbs were widely circulated and used across different social classes, and their usage was not confined to any specific group. When compiling these Chinese expressions, Bouvet listed only the original Chinese text without translating them into Western languages, a decision closely related to the intended audience and purpose of his work. Nevertheless, this also indicates the limitations of Bouvet's efforts in collecting and introducing Chinese proverbs, as the lack of translation hindered their dissemination in the West.

The first person to introduce Chinese proverbs to Europe was the French Jesuit and "the last China Figurist (Lundbæk 1993)", Pierre-Martial Cibot (1727–1780). Most of Cibot's works are included in the *Mémoires concernant l'Histoire, les Sciences, les Arts, les Mœurs, les Usages* etc. *des Chinois* (hereafter referred to as *Mémoires*). The fourth volume of the *Mémoires*, published in Paris in 1779, contains the work *Doctrine ancienne et nouvelles des Chinois sur la piété filiale* (Amiot et al. 1779, pp. 1–298). In the eighth section of this work, Cibot listed several maxims and proverbs related to filial piety in China. Four years after his death, in 1784, the tenth volume of the *Mémoires* included his *Pensées, Maximes et Proverbes extraits et traduits de divers livres chinois* (Amiot et al. 1784, pp. 144–78). In this piece, Cibot made a clear distinction between maxims and proverbs, categorizing the expressions he excerpted from Chinese books into 10 thematic groups[3]. The tenth group, titled "Proverbs", contained 404 French translations of Chinese proverbs. Cibot did not provide the original Chinese texts for these proverbs. When presenting maxims and proverbs related to filial piety, he wrote, "Our objective is to introduce the concept of filial piety in China, not their manner of writing (Amiot et al. 1779, p. 268)". This reveals that Cibot's primary goal in collecting and translating Chinese proverbs was to make Chinese culture more accessible to Western readers, particularly French missionaries. By simplifying language barriers, he provided a convenient cultural reference tool for Western audiences who did not under-

stand Chinese. However, the exclusive use of French limited the authenticity and depth of these proverbs in cross-cultural transmission.

In conclusion, Catholic missionaries initially showed great interest in ancient Chinese maxims, but by the 18th century, French Jesuits gradually began to focus on proverbs—which could be described as the embodiment of maxims in everyday life. This shift led to the first attempts at collecting and translating Chinese proverbs. Thus, while missionaries remained focused on the "great tradition" of Chinese culture, they also started to take an interest in the "little tradition". However, Bouvet's collection of Chinese proverbs only included the original Chinese text and was limited in scope, focusing on a single theme. Cibot's collection, on the other hand, provided only French translations without the original Chinese. Their efforts in collecting and translating Chinese proverbs were therefore limited, and Western audiences were still unable to fully understand Chinese proverbs.

3. Overview of Chinese Proverb Collections by Joseph de Prémare, Paul Perny, and Joseph Van Oost

3.1. Publication Background and Compilation Structure

3.1.1. The Chinese Proverbs Section in Joseph de Prémare's *Notitia Linguae Sinicae* (1831)

In 1831, the French Jesuit Joseph de Prémare's *Notitia Linguae Sinicae* (Prémare 1831) was published in Malacca by the Anglo-Chinese College. In fact, this work had been completed as early as 1728, but due to various delays (Z. Li 2014, pp. 53–68), it was not published until a century later. Written in Latin with Chinese examples, the book is a significant early Western study of Chinese grammar. It also serves as a compilation of Western scholars' knowledge of the Chinese language and literature at the time. The book is divided into two main parts: vernacular Chinese and classical Chinese. The French Sinologist Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832) (Rémusat 1857, preface, pp. ix–x) described it as the best work on Chinese studies by Europeans to date and noted that it was the only one to clearly distinguish between the two Chinese styles, which all other grammarians had confused. Multiple versions of this book exist, and the version referred to in this paper is the 1831 edition published in Malacca.

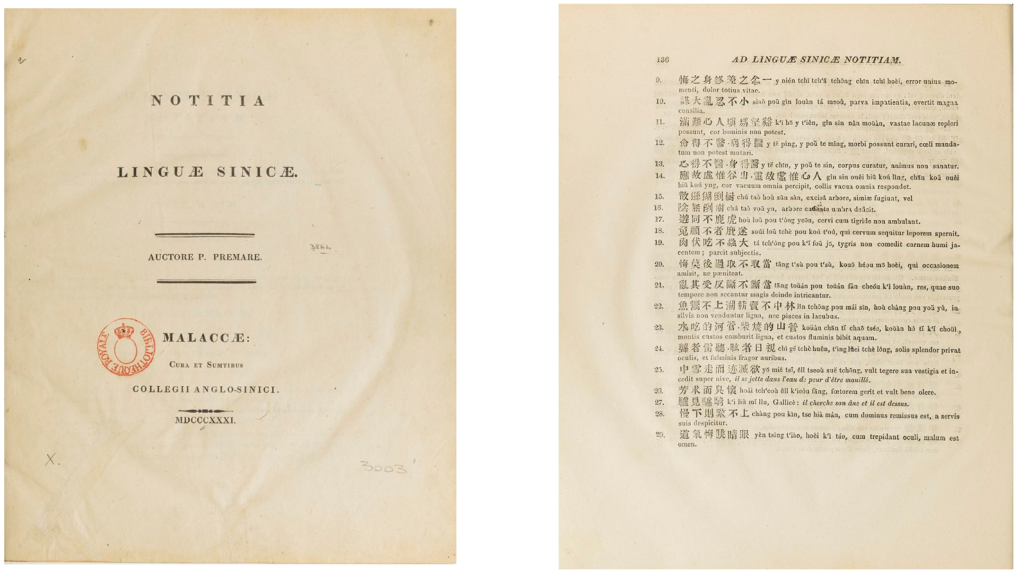
The first part of the book, titled *De Lingua Vulgaris et Familiari Stylo*, concludes with a section called *Collectio Proverbiorum*, which spans nine pages and lists 165 entries. Prémare assigned a number to each proverb, followed by the original Chinese proverb (written from right to left), a phonetic transcription of the Chinese characters in a French style, and finally, a Latin translation (Figure 1). Prémare did not categorize the proverbs, nor is there an apparent rationale for their order.

Even without considering that *Notitia Linguae Sinicae* was written in 1728, based solely on its publication date, Prémare remains the first Western scholar to systematically present Chinese folk proverbs in an organized format. He was the first to approach Chinese proverbs from a language-learning perspective, treating them as a part of the spoken language for collection and translation. His mixed format, which combines the characters' form, pronunciation, and meaning, offered Western learners a quick and efficient way to study a large number of Chinese proverbs.

3.1.2. Paul Perny's *Proverbes Chinois Recueillis et Mis en Ordre* (1869)

In 1869, *Proverbes chinois recueillis et mis en ordre* (Perny 1869) (hereafter referred to as *Proverbes Chinois*), compiled by Paul Perny, a missionary from the Paris Foreign Missions (Missions Étrangères de Paris, abbreviated as MEP), was published in Paris by Firmin Didot Frère, Fils et Cie. Perny arrived in Guizhou Province in 1847 and served as the head of the Guizhou mission from 1853 to 1860. However, his missionary approach differed from the overall principles of the MEP, which led to opposition from the order. As a result, he was marginalized and eventually left the society in 1872[4]. Perny authored four major works on the Chinese language, including *Proverbes Chinois*. Before Perny, missionaries such as Joachim Bouvet, Joseph de Prémare, and Pierre-Martial Cibot had also made efforts to collect Chinese proverbs. However, in their works, proverbs occupied only a

small portion and were never compiled into a standalone volume. Therefore, Perny's *Proverbes Chinois* became the first independent collection of Chinese proverbs compiled by a Catholic missionary.



(**a**) (**b**)

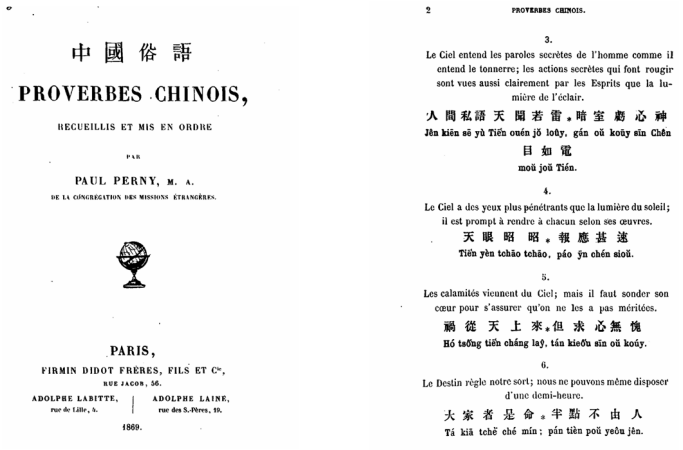
Figure 1. (**a**) The cover of Joseph de Prémare's *Notitia Linguae Sinicae*; (**b**) a sample page from the proverb section. Source: gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Littérature et art, X-3003. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k3162427 (accessed on 19 October 2024).

In terms of its compilation structure, *Proverbes Chinois* consists of a preface, a table of contents, and the main body. The preface, spanning one page, outlines the importance of studying Chinese proverbs and provides a brief introduction to the book. The main body of the collection spans 135 pages and is divided into two parts, with a total of 624 numbered entries. The first part contains 441 entries, organized into 22 categories. The first 21 categories each have a clearly defined theme, including: heaven, study, the brevity of life, discretion of speech, self-improvement, education, gossip, women, foresight, good advice, friendship, gratitude, wealth, adversity, capital vices, parents, judgments, prudence, patience, wisdom, and unity and diligence. The 22nd category is labeled "various proverbs". In this part, each entry proverb is presented with its number, followed by the French translation, the original Chinese proverb, and a Romanized transcription of the Chinese characters in a French style (Figure 2). The second part of the collection contains only the French translations of 183 Chinese proverbs. Since this part lacks the original Chinese texts—and because Chinese proverbs often have multiple expressions conveying the same idea—it is difficult to accurately identify the corresponding original proverbs based solely on the French translations. As a result, we adopted a cautious approach to this second part, focusing our research primarily on the first part.

3.1.3. Joseph Van Oost's *Dictons et Proverbes des Chinois Habitant la Mongolie Sud-Ouest* (1918)

Dictons et proverbes des Chinois habitant la Mongolie Sud-ouest (Van Oost 1918) was published in 1918 by the T'ou-se-we Orphanage Press in Zi-Ka-Wei near Shanghai and was included in the *Variétés sinologiques*, a Sinological series founded by Henri Havret (1848–1901), where it was listed as number 50 in the series. The compiler, Joseph Van Oost, was a Belgian missionary of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Congregatio Immaculati Cordis Mariae, abbreviated as CICM). He served in the Southwestern Mongolia mission[5]—referring to what is, today, the southwestern part of Inner Mongolia, China—from 1902 to 1929, except for a two-year period between 1912 and 1914 when he returned to Belgium

due to illness. During his 25 years in China, Van Oost developed a deep understanding of the natural and cultural conditions of this region, particularly the Tumet area[6]. In addition to his missionary work, Van Oost wrote and published several books and articles, including this collection of proverbs.



中國俗語

PROVERBES CHINOIS,

RECUEILLIS ET MIS EN ORDRE

PAR

PAUL PERNY, M. A.

DE LA CONGRÉGATION DES MISSIONS ÉTRANGÈRES.

PARIS,

FIRMIN DIDOT FRÈRES, FILS ET Cie,

RUE JACOB, 56.

ADOLPHE LABITTE, rue de Lille, 5. | ADOLPHE LAINE, rue des S.-Pères, 19.

1869.

2 PROVERBES CHINOIS.

3.

Le Ciel entend les paroles secrètes de l'homme comme il entend le tonnerre; les actions secrètes qui font rougir sont vues aussi clairement par les Esprits que la lumière de l'éclair.

人間私語天聞若雷。暗室虧心神

Jên kiên sē yù Tiēn ouén jŏ loûy, gán oŭ koûy sīn Chên

目如電

moŭ joŭ Tién.

4.

Le Ciel a des yeux plus pénétrants que la lumière du soleil; il est prompt à rendre à chacun selon ses œuvres.

天眼昭昭。報應甚速

Tiēn yèn tchāo tchāo, páo ŷn chén sioŭ.

5.

Les calamités viennent du Ciel; mais il faut sonder son cœur pour s'assurer qu'on ne les a pas méritées.

禍從天上來。但求心無愧

Hó tsŏng tiēn cháng laŷ, tán kieŏu sīn oŭ koúy.

6.

Le Destin règle notre sort; nous ne pouvons même disposer d'une demi-heure.

大家者是命。半點不由人

Tá kiā tchē ché mín; pán tièn poŭ yeôu jên.

(**a**) (**b**)

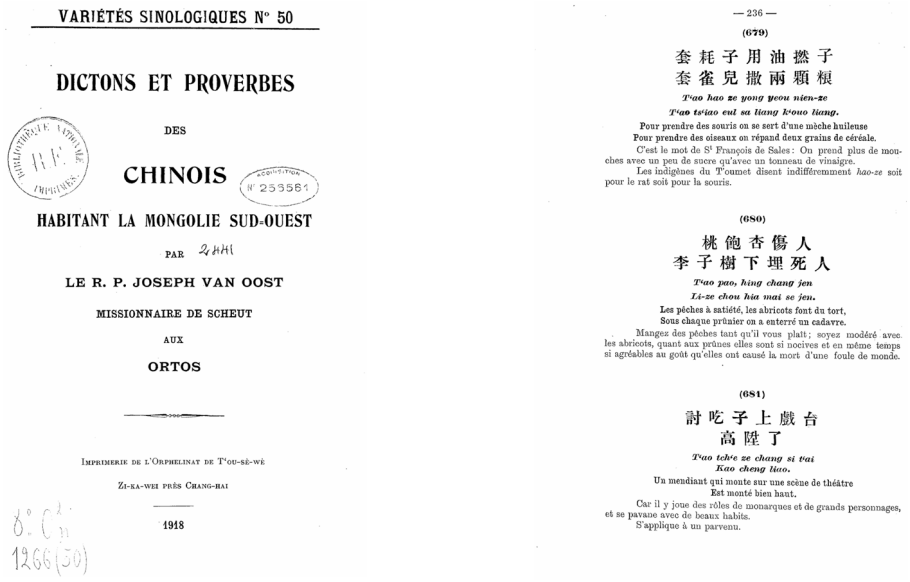
Figure 2. (**a**) The cover of Paul Perny's *Proverbes Chinois*; (**b**) a sample page of *Proverbes Chinois*. Source: gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Littérature et art, Z-57385. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k57497215 (accessed on 19 October 2024).

The book is structured into three parts: the preface, the main body, and an appendix. In the preface, Van Oost explains his reasons for compiling the work and offers his perspectives on local proverbs. The main body spans 348 pages and contains 1000 numbered entries. Each entry includes the original Chinese proverb, a Romanized transcription, and a French translation, with most translations accompanied by additional explanations in French (Figure 3). According to Van Oost, the Romanization system he used was based on R.P. Debesse S.J.'s *Petit dictionnaire chinois-français*. Notably, Van Oost not only adopted Debesse's phonetic system but also acknowledged the influence of the French Jesuit Léon Wieger (1856–1933) on the missionaries of the CICM in the preface. Additionally, the book was published by the T'ou-se-we Orphanage Press, founded by the Jesuits. This highlights the collaboration and synergy between different Catholic orders in China during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in academic and cultural dissemination. Although the CICM was a Belgian order, it maintained close ties with the French Catholic Church, partly due to financial support from the French government (Y. Zhang 2006, pp. 62–63).

The arrangement of proverbs in this book is particularly innovative. In the latter half of the 19th century, most missionary-compiled proverb collections were organized by thematic categories, as was the case with Paul Perny, as well as Protestant missionaries like William Scarborough and Arthur Henderson Smith[7]. However, although these collections broadly classified the proverbs, the entries within each category were often disorganized and lacked a clear order. In contrast, Joseph Van Oost arranged the proverbs alphabetically according to the Romanized transcription of the first character and numbered them sequentially. This approach effectively transformed the collection into a sort of proverb dictionary, emphasizing its practical function and making it easier for missionaries to "immediately find a proverb after hearing it or, if they cannot find it, to add it (Van Oost 1918, preface)".

Although Van Oost did not classify the proverbs thematically, he extracted 129 keywords based on the content of the proverbs, such as "friendship", "family", and "poverty". In the appendix at the end of the book, he listed these keywords in alphabetical order in French and marked the corresponding proverb numbers for each keyword. Through this appendix, readers can quickly get an overview of the main themes covered in the collec-

tion. Additionally, the appendix serves as an index, allowing readers to easily locate and study proverbs related to specific themes.


VARIÉTÉS SINOLOGIQUES N° 50

DICTONS ET PROVERBES

DES

CHINOIS

HABITANT LA MONGOLIE SUD-OUEST

PAR

LE R. P. JOSEPH VAN OOST

MISSIONNAIRE DE SCHEUT

AUX

ORTOS

IMPRIMERIE DE L'ORPHELINAT DE T'OU-SÈ-WÈ

ZI-KA-WEI PRÈS CHANG-HAI

1918

(a)

— 236 —

(679)

套耗子用油撚子
套雀兒撒兩顆糠

T'ao hao ze yong yeou nien-ze
T'ao ts'iao eul sa liang k'ouo kang.

Pour prendre des souris on se sert d'une mèche huileuse
Pour prendre des oiseaux on répand deux grains de céréale.

C'est le mot de St François de Sales : On prend plus de mouches avec un peu de sucre qu'avec un tonneau de vinaigre.
Les indigènes du T'oumet disent indifféremment *hao-ze* soit pour le rat soit pour la souris.

(680)

桃饱杏傷人
李子樹下埋死人

T'ao pao, hing chang jen
Li-ze chou hia mai se jen.

Les pêches à satiété, les abricots font du tort,
Sous chaque prunier on a enterré un cadavre.

Mangez des pêches tant qu'il vous plaît ; soyez modéré avec les abricots, quant aux prunes elles sont si nocives et en même temps si agréables au goût qu'elles ont causé la mort d'une foule de monde.

(681)

討吃子上戲台
高陞了

T'ao tch'e ze chang si tai
Kao cheng liao.

Un mendiant qui monte sur une scène de théâtre
Est monté bien haut.

Car il y joue des rôles de monarques et de grands personnages, et se pavane avec de beaux habits.
S'applique à un parvenu.

(b)

Figure 3. (**a**) The cover of Joseph Van Oost's *Dictons et proverbes des Chinois habitant la Mongolie Sud-ouest*; (**b**) a sample page of *Dictons et proverbes des Chinois habitant la Mongolie Sud-ouest*. Source: gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Philosophie, histoire, sciences de l'homme, 8-O2N-1266 (50). https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5436616k (accessed on 19 October 2024).

3.2. Purpose of Compilation

While Joseph de Prémare, Paul Perny, and Joseph Van Oost had different focuses in compiling collections of Chinese proverbs, their overarching goals were largely aligned. First, the collections were intended to meet the needs of language learning. Second, they aimed to deepen the missionaries' understanding of Chinese culture and the Chinese way of thinking. Ultimately, however, the fundamental purpose was to support the Catholic missionary efforts in China.

3.2.1. The Purpose of Joseph de Prémare's Proverb Collection

Notitia Linguae Sinicae is the culmination of Joseph de Prémare's years of Chinese language study, and its primary purpose was to help missionaries in China acquire Chinese language skills. He was the first to distinguish between the study of written and spoken Chinese. At the beginning of the first part of *Notitia Linguae Sinicae*, he outlined three goals for missionaries learning spoken Chinese: to understand conversations with Chinese people, to comprehend vernacular literary works, and to write in the vernacular style (Prémare 1831, pp. 38–39). Prémare explained that he wrote the book in Latin, rather than French, to make it accessible to all missionaries and anyone interested in learning Chinese (Z. Li 2014, p. 135; Lundbœk 1991). Before listing the proverbs, he emphasized their importance to the Chinese language, noting that "the Chinese language gains a considerable amount of gravity and strength from moral sayings and ancient proverbs (Prémare 1831, p. 135)". In the 17th and 18th centuries, missionaries translating Chinese maxims rarely provided the original Chinese text, meaning that readers could grasp the intended message but were unable to learn the Chinese language itself. Prémare specifically remarked, "in these proverbs, one should not only pay attention to the meaning but also take note of the phrases themselves (Prémare 1831, p. 135)", urging readers to focus on the linguistic aspects of Chinese proverbs.

Although Prémare's Christian beliefs are not overtly present in the book, in his correspondence with Étienne Fourmont (1683–1745), he revealed that the ultimate goal of writing the book was to "show that the history of Christianity is as old as the history of the whole world (Z. Li 2014, p.138)", reflecting his Figurist beliefs.

3.2.2. The Purpose of Paul Perny's Proverb Collection

Paul Perny's primary purpose in collecting proverbs was similar to that of Prémare: to provide a resource that would facilitate the learning of Chinese for missionaries from various countries. As a somewhat unconventional figure within the MEP, Perny diverged from the mainstream missionary approach of the order. He had a deep appreciation for the Chinese language and culture, and he considered the study of both spoken and written Chinese to be equally important.

In the preface to *Proverbes Chinois*, Paul Perny praised the beauty of Chinese proverbs. He noted that Chinese proverbs are "so graceful and witty" with "their structure, rhythm, harmony, and especially their antithesis", adding that they are "strangely disfigured when translated into our cold and monotonous European languages (Perny 1869, preface)". He also indicated that these proverbs are a microcosm of Chinese culture, and that "nothing reflects the character of a nation better than its proverbs and common sayings". He further pointed out that Chinese youth learn and master their native culture from a young age by memorizing collections of proverbs. For Perny, proverbs were not only a tool for language learning but also an important way to understand Chinese society, culture, and value systems. While he acknowledged that the delicate nuances of these Chinese proverbs are often lost in translation to European languages, he believed that "such literal translations could still provide valuable assistance to Western learners of Chinese (Perny 1869, preface)". Additionally, the fact that the second part of *Proverbes Chinois* contains only French translations, without the original Chinese text, reflects that one of Perny's key goals was to make Chinese culture accessible to Westerners through proverbs.

As a Catholic missionary, Perny's purpose was inevitably instructional. However, Lee-Lee and Trujillo-González point out that Perny's compilation of a series of works on the Chinese language was not limited to facilitating language learning for missionaries. He also sought to engage in academic discussions about the true nature of the Chinese language, particularly in the context of the 19th-century rise of comparative linguistics and debates within European Sinology regarding whether Chinese was an isolating language (Lee-Lee and Trujillo-González 2019).

3.2.3. The Purpose of Joseph Van Oost's Proverb Collection

Compared to Joseph de Prémare and Paul Perny, Joseph Van Oost's purpose in compiling a collection of Chinese proverbs was more direct and specific: to address the challenges faced by missionaries in daily interactions with the local population. In his view, it was essential for missionaries to learn local proverbs and sayings. On one hand, the people they were trying to evangelize had low levels of education and could not access written information, relying solely on oral communication. On the other hand, Van Oost regarded proverbs as a form of localized classical eloquence. Drawing from his own missionary experience, he believed that in conversations with the local people, "a proverb is an argument (Van Oost 1918, preface)", possessing the power to quickly persuade the audience.

In the preface, Joseph Van Oost expressed his views on the local Chinese proverbs. He marveled at their vast number and wide-ranging content, observing that the Chinese proverbs in the southwestern region of Inner Mongolia were often crude in language, reflecting the "simple and unrefined daily life" of the local people. Yet, he found these proverbs to be vivid and full of life. Furthermore, Van Oost wrote that these local proverbs offer valuable insights into the mindset of the Chinese farmers, "rugged people closely tied to the land, struggling against the harsh and unyielding nature of Inner Mongolia", and that understanding these proverbs helps explain much about their character, lifestyle, concerns, and aspirations (Van Oost 1918, preface).

Joseph Van Oost's statements in the preface, along with the highly practical arrangement of the book, clearly highlight his purpose in compiling the collection of proverbs. He intended to use proverbs as a tool to help missionaries understand and engage with the local population by learning and applying these proverbs in practice, ultimately supporting their missionary efforts.

4. Analysis of the Chinese Proverbs Included in the Three Collections

4.1. Sources of the Proverbs

We conducted a preliminary analysis of the sources of the proverbs collected by the three Catholic missionaries—Joseph de Prémare, Paul Perny, and Joseph Van Oost—to verify where each proverb was found and to examine the methods these missionaries used to gather Chinese proverbs.

It is important to note that the source of a proverb in the missionaries' collections does not necessarily equate to its origin. One key issue in paremiology is the study of proverbs' origins. For example, Mieder Wolfgang identified four primary origins of Western proverbs (Mieder 2015), while Zhang Juwen categorized the origins of Chinese proverbs into four stages (J. Zhang 2020). Some of the proverbs collected by the missionaries may trace their origins back to ancient times, such as the pre-7th century Classical era. However, the missionaries may have encountered these proverbs through the contemporary texts of their time. We will explore this distinction in more detail below.

4.1.1. Sources of Proverbs Collected by Joseph de Prémare

One of the primary sources for the proverbs collected by Joseph de Prémare was the vernacular literature of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties. In the first part of *Notitia Linguae Sinicae*, Prémare explicitly stated that this section focused on the "Mandarin language" (官話), spoken by the educated elite, noting that he drew his examples primarily from *Qu* (元曲) and vernacular novels of the Ming and Qing periods (Prémare 1831, pp. 38–39). According to our analysis, most of the proverbs collected by Prémare can be traced back to these Ming and Qing novels. Among them, a significant number come from *Water Margin* (水滸傳), with 28 proverbs, *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (金瓶梅), with 24, 11 from Feng Menglong (馮夢龍)'s short vernacular stories, and another 11 from the works of Li Yu (李漁). The vernacular novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties were a rich repository of Chinese proverbs, as they were written in a colloquial style and made extensive use of them (Zhai 2013, preface, p. 1). For example, China's "Four Great Classical Novels" are particularly noted for their skillful use of proverbs (Dong 2022). These novels not only frequently cited popular proverbs but also often modified existing ones or created entirely new sayings (Qi et al. 2008, p. 606). For instance, the proverb "Many ships don't block the harbor, and many cars don't block the road"(船多不礙港，車多不礙路) collected by Joseph de Prémare was originally coined in *The Plum in the Golden Vase* and does not appear in earlier texts. This novel contains an abundance of folk proverbs, leading some scholars to view it as a veritable encyclopedia of vernacular sayings from the common people (L. Zhang 2011, preface, p. 2). In addition, Chinese proverbs exhibit great structural flexibility, with many proverbs having multiple variants. As we mentioned earlier, many proverbs have existed since ancient times but have undergone changes in structure or wording over the centuries. According to our research, most of the proverbs listed by Joseph de Prémare are identical to the variants found in the Ming and Qing vernacular novels. This indicates that the vernacular literature of the Ming and Qing dynasties was a major source for Prémare's collection of proverbs.

The second source of the proverbs collected by Prémare was ancient Chinese classics. For instance, he gathered eight proverbs from the *Huainanzi* (淮南子). *Huainanzi* is one of China's ancient classics, compiling the scholarly debates from the court of Liu An, Prince of Huainan, before 139 BCE, and encompassing Daoist, Confucian, Legalist, and folk religious thought. This shows that Prémare also valued sourcing proverbs from the classical Chinese literature, emphasizing their role in cultural transmission.

The third source is children's literacy primers. A few of the proverbs collected by Prémare come from *Zengguang Xianwen* (增廣賢文), a Ming dynasty primer that compiled maxims and proverbs from ancient China. These primers played a significant role in traditional Chinese education (Brockey 2007, pp. 247–49), focusing on literacy while also imparting ethical and general knowledge. They contributed to cultural transmission and reflected the broader popularization of Confucian culture in social education (B. Chen 2014, p. 353). Western missionaries, as early participants in the Chinese cultural sphere, were unintentionally drawn into this process of knowledge exchange (Hu and Zhang 2022). Early missionaries in China had an urgent need to quickly learn the Chinese language and understand Chinese culture. Consequently, they often turned to children's primers as an efficient way to access both Chinese elite texts and core cultural knowledge.

4.1.2. Sources of Proverbs Collected by Paul Perny

In the preface, Paul Perny explained the sources of the proverbs he collected: most were gathered through conversations with the Chinese, while the remainder were taken from *Zengguang Suyu* (增廣俗語) (Perny 1869, preface). However, we believe that, in addition to the two sources he mentioned, Perny also drew upon the work of Joseph de Prémare.

What Perny referred to as *Zengguang Suyu* is most likely *Zengguang Xianwen*, the children's primer we discussed earlier. Based on our analysis, 112 of the proverbs for which he provided the original Chinese text are identical to those found in *Zengguang Xianwen*, while an additional 21 are similar with slight variations. This further supports the idea that children's literacy primers were highly valued by Western missionaries.

Secondly, a considerable number of the proverbs collected by Paul Perny are oral sayings with unclear origins. Nie conducted a detailed study of the phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar in Perny's works on the Chinese language, concluding that they reflect Southwestern Mandarin, specifically the variety spoken in Guiyang (貴陽) and its surrounding areas during the mid-to-late 19th century. Perny spent a considerable amount of time as a missionary in Southwest China, and some of the proverbs he collected have not been documented in any written sources. These sayings are found only in contemporary Guiyang dialects or other sub-dialects of Southwestern Mandarin (Nie 2018, pp. 38–49). According to Perny's account in the preface, these proverbs were likely gathered during his fieldwork in the region.

Lastly, although Paul Perny did not mention Joseph de Prémare in his collection, a careful comparison of the proverbs gathered by both missionaries reveals that 86 proverbs in Perny's *Proverbes Chinois* are identical to those in Prémare's collection, with 19 being strikingly similar. In other words, Perny re-recorded 51.8% of the proverbs previously collected by Prémare. While this data alone may not definitively prove that Perny drew directly from Prémare's work, we have further evidence to support this assumption. After leaving the MEP in 1872, Perny, still affiliated with the Catholic Church, assisted Augustin Bonnetty (1798–1879), a writer and founder of the *Annales de philosophie chrétienne*, in editing, translating, and annotating Prémare's works. This collaboration culminated in the publication of *Vestiges des Principaux Dogmes Chrétiens Tirés des Anciens Livres Chinois* (Prémare 1878) in 1878. This suggests that Perny was more familiar with Prémare's work than most Sinologists of his time. Moreover, in some instances, Perny's translations of certain proverbs are closely aligned with those of Prémare. Taken together, this evidence strongly suggests that Perny consulted Prémare's collection when compiling his own.

4.1.3. Sources of Proverbs Collected by Joseph Van Oost

The 1000 entries collected by Joseph Van Oost show significant differences compared to earlier collections. We compared Van Oost's proverbs with those from major previous works, including those by Joseph de Prémare and Paul Perny, as well as two well-known Protestant collections—*A Collection of Chinese Proverbs* and *Proverbs and Common Sayings from the Chinese*. Our analysis reveals that only a small number of Van Oost's proverbs overlap with those from earlier collections, while the vast majority had not been recorded

by any missionaries before. Most of these proverbs existed solely in the oral tradition of local communities and were not documented in written form, making it impossible to trace their origins. In his preface, Van Oost explained that he gathered these proverbs entirely through direct interactions with the local population. This suggests that Van Oost took a fundamentally new approach—rather than relying on written sources, he turned directly to the people, recording proverbs passed down orally among the local community.

4.2. Content and Characteristics of the Proverbs

In this section, we analyzed the length of each proverb, categorized them, and observed their linguistic style. While there are various scholarly approaches to categorizing Chinese proverbs, we adopted a simple method by dividing them into two main categories: those related to natural production (such as agriculture, weather, and natural knowledge) and those related to society (including philosophy, social knowledge, and moral principles) (Qi et al. 2008, p. 584; Wen 2019, pp. 100–1). Categorizing proverbs is an important tool for interpreting their content. By examining how the proverbs are distributed across these categories, readers can clearly observe the overall characteristics of the collection and identify areas that the compiler may have emphasized or overlooked.

4.2.1. Content and Characteristics of Proverbs Collected by Joseph de Prémare

In Joseph de Prémare's collection of proverbs, 165 entries are listed, but the 8th entry includes a variant of the proverb, bringing the actual total to 166 proverbs. We conducted a character count of the 166 proverbs (Figure 4).

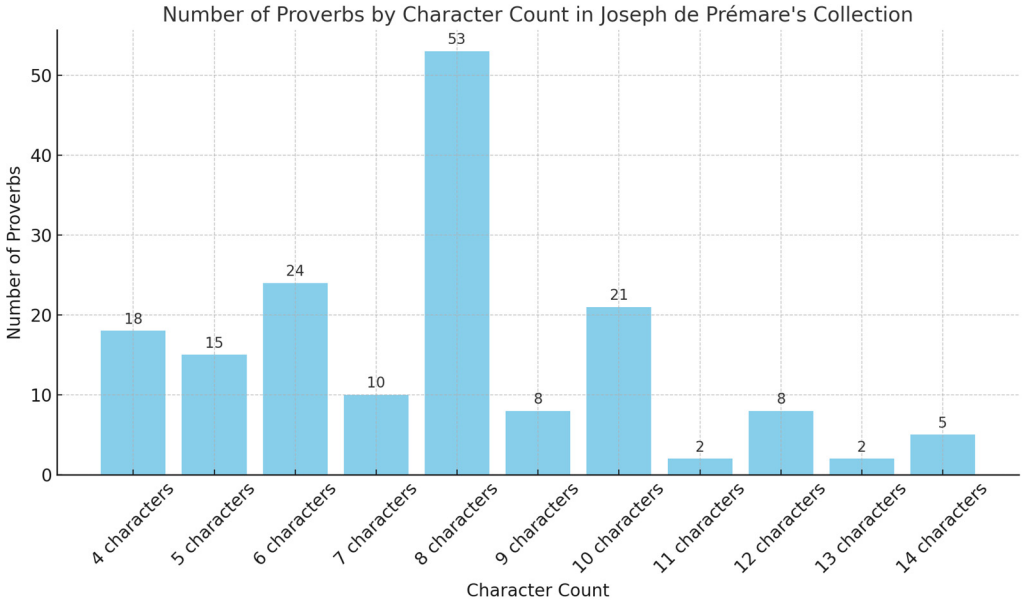


Figure 4. Number of proverbs by character count in Joseph de Prémare's collection.

As shown in the chart, 8-character proverbs are the most common, followed by 6-character and 10-character proverbs. Proverbs with more than 10 characters are relatively rare. Overall, Prémare's collection is characterized by its brevity and compactness.

Structurally, 60 of the proverbs are single-clause forms, such as "No waves rise in a favorable wind" (順風不起浪) and "Real gold does not fear fire" (真金不怕火). These proverbs are concise and impactful, with many of them being *Chengyu*, such as "Searching for a donkey while riding one" (騎驢覓驢), "Calling a deer a horse" (指鹿為馬), and "When the tree falls, the monkeys scatter" (樹倒猢猻散). *Chengyu* are particularly compact and refined, being less influenced by regional dialects, and are regarded as the most "cultivated" form of colloquial expression. In addition, there are 86 compound proverbs, each made up of two short clauses. In most cases, the two clauses have an equal number of characters, re-

sulting in a balanced, symmetrical structure. Examples include "What the ear hears is false, what the eye sees is true" (耳聞是虛，眼見是實), "Jade cannot be polished into a useful object without being carved, and a person cannot achieve wisdom without undergoing hardship" (玉不琢不成器，人不磨不成道), and "A person cannot have good fortune for a thousand days, and a flower cannot remain red for a hundred" (人無千日之好，花無百日之紅).

Joseph de Prémare did not categorize the proverbs in his collection. Based on our observations, nature-related proverbs are quite rare among the 166 entries. There are almost no proverbs about agriculture or weather, with only a few addressing basic natural principles, such as "If the wind doesn't blow, the tree won't move" (風不來，樹不動) and "When the melon is ripe, it falls on its own" (瓜熟自落). Even these proverbs tend to serve as metaphors for human experiences and are often used to express general life wisdom. In contrast, the collection is dominated by proverbs related to human relationships, ethical conduct, and social norms. Many focus on personal moral development, such as "A gentleman does not dwell on past grievances" (君子不念舊惡) and "Good people are rewarded with blessings, while evil people bring disaster upon themselves" (善人得福爲之賞，惡人得福爲之殃). This reflects the widespread influence of Confucian thought on popular culture. As mentioned earlier, most of these proverbs are drawn from vernacular novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties, which often centered around romantic stories of talented scholars and beautiful maidens, and seldom touched on rural life or farming. As a result, proverbs about social behavior were more commonly recorded in the literature.

Stylistically, although these proverbs are widely used in everyday speech, their language remains polished and refined. Many of them feature rhetorical devices like parallelism and antithesis, which create a balanced and harmonious structure, enhancing their elegance and formal tone.

4.2.2. Content and Characteristics of Proverbs Collected by Paul Perny

Paul Perny's collection of Chinese proverbs includes 441 numbered entries, with the 226th entry containing a proverb and its variant. Additionally, three proverbs are listed twice: "Tigers and deer do not roam together" (虎鹿不同游), "When the eye twitches, regret follows" (眼睛跳，晦氣到), and "When one person rebels, nine families are executed" (一人造反，九族遭誅). Therefore, the collection contains a total of 439 distinct Chinese proverbs. The character count for each proverb in Perny's collection is summarized in the table below (Figure 5).

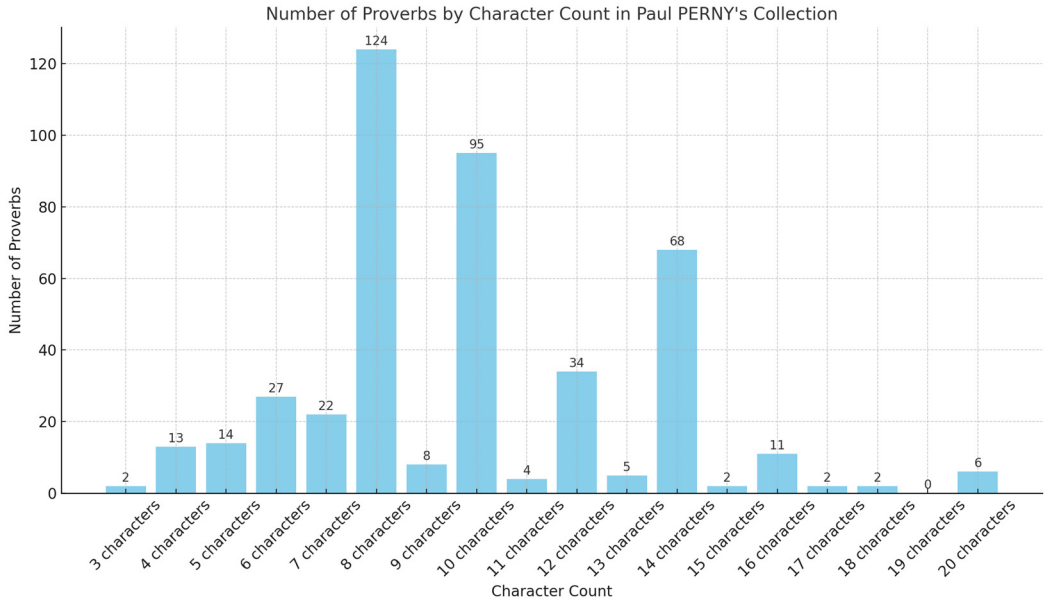


Figure 5. Number of proverbs by character count in Paul Perny's collection.

From the chart, we can see that, similar to Joseph de Prémare's collection, 8-character proverbs are the most frequent in Paul Perny's collection, totaling 124 entries. The number of 10-character proverbs is also significant, and there are quite a few 12- and 14-character proverbs as well. Together, the 8-, 10-, 12-, and 14-character proverbs make up 73% of the total collection. Additionally, Perny included a few longer proverbs with 16 and 20 characters. In contrast, the proportion of 4-, 5-, and 6-character proverbs in his collection is relatively small, with only 13 4-character proverbs, fewer than the 18 in Prémare's collection. This indicates Perny's preference for compound, longer proverbs rather than shorter, idiomatic expressions. Most of his compound proverbs consist of two clauses, but a few are composed of four clauses.

As mentioned earlier, Paul Perny categorized the Chinese proverbs he collected into 22 groups, with the first 21 being focused on specific themes. All of these fall under the category of social proverbs, many of which reflect key Confucian concepts such as filial piety, friendship, self-cultivation, and family relationships. Some themes, like care for self-improvement, wisdom, virtue, patience, prudence, capital vices, study, and education, directly address personal growth and moral education. Others highlight family ethics and interpersonal relationships, including themes on parents, women, and friends. These categories align closely with Confucian values. Perny's admiration for Chinese culture is evident in his article "La Chine supérieure à la France", where he praised China's moral education, marriage system, ancestor-respecting traditions, social customs, and family relationships (Guo 2016). His categorization of Chinese proverbs reflects his deep respect for traditional Chinese culture, especially Confucian thought.

It is noteworthy that Paul Perny selected "Heaven" as the first theme in his collection of proverbs. *Tian* (天), one of the oldest Chinese terms for heaven, holds a central place in Chinese mythology, philosophy, and religion. Described by Jacques Gernet as representing both "divine and natural forces, as well as the order of society and the universe (Gernet 1991)", *Tian* is a core element of the Chinese belief system. For missionaries, *Tian* was not only a foundational term in their study of Chinese but also served as a bridge connecting Christian beliefs with Chinese cosmology. Since the publication of *Tian Zhu Shi Yi* (天主實義, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*), missionaries in China had engaged in ongoing discussions about the interpretation of *Tian*. Perny's decision to start his proverb collection with the theme of *Tian* underscores its importance and reflects his continuation of this missionary focus. By presenting proverbs on *Tian*, Perny offered Western readers a unique insight into the Chinese understanding of fate and divine order.

In the 22nd category, "various proverbs", Paul Perny included several distinctive sayings from the Guiyang dialect, created by local people and rarely found in written records. Examples include the following: "Every family's gate leads to Beijing" (家家門口通北京), "New things are fragrant, old things are foul" (新是香，陳是臭), and "If a silversmith doesn't steal, his family starves; if a tailor doesn't steal fabric, his wife has no pants" (銀匠不偷人，餓死一家人，裁縫不偷布，婦人莫得褲).

Despite including these local sayings, Perny's collection refrains from excessively vulgar or crude language, maintaining a mix of everyday colloquial expressions without being overly coarse. The overall style reflects a balance between plain, accessible language and a level of refinement.

4.2.3. Content and Characteristics of Proverbs Collected by Joseph Van Oost

Joseph Van Oost's collection of Chinese proverbs contains 1000 numbered entries, though some of the numbers include more than one proverb, resulting in a total of 1026 proverbs. The word count for each proverb is detailed in the table below (Figure 6).

From the statistical analysis, it is evident that although 8-character and 10-character proverbs are still the most prevalent, the proverbs collected by Van Oost are overall noticeably longer than those gathered by the two earlier Catholic missionaries, with the longest proverb extending to 45 characters. While shorter proverbs tend to be more concise and

direct, longer proverbs allow for greater elaboration, though this added length can sometimes lead to redundancy, giving them a more informal and conversational tone.

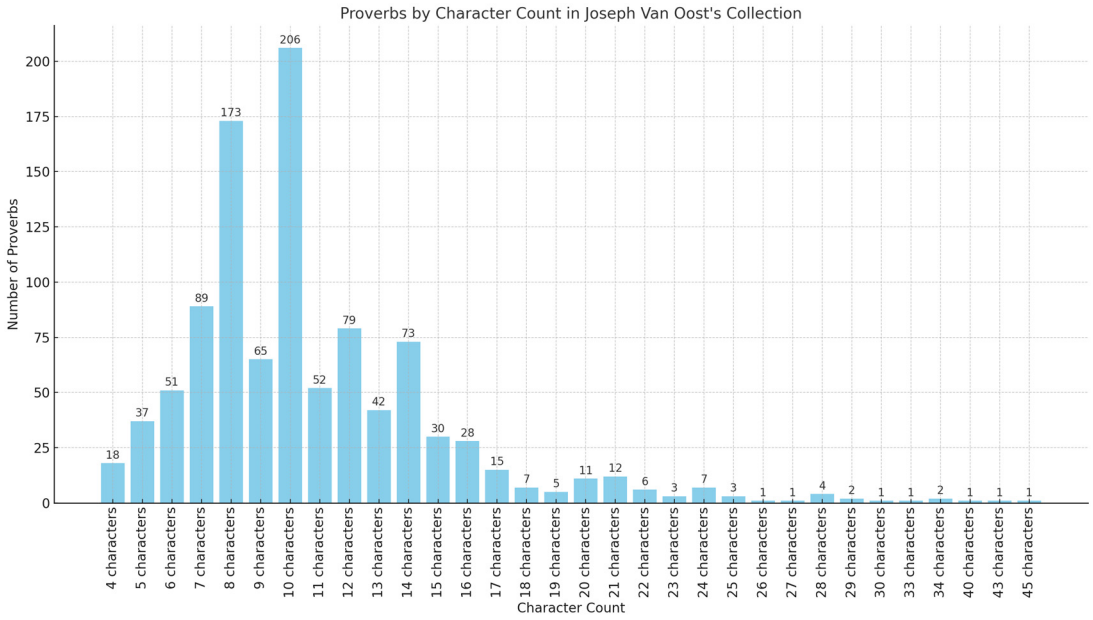


Figure 6. Number of proverbs by character count in Joseph Van Oost's collection.

Structurally, Van Oost's collection, like those of Joseph de Prémare and Paul Perny, predominantly features compound proverbs. Unlike the earlier collections, in which most of the proverbs consist of just two clauses, more than half of the proverbs in Van Oost's collection contain three or more clauses. Moreover, the clauses in these proverbs often differ in length, lacking the symmetry or parallelism common in the earlier examples, which imparts a notably impromptu and spontaneous feel. For example, "One ox with nine calves, all pulling five plows together, but looking back, no one can replace anyone" (一牛下九犢，共拉五張犁，回頭看誰也替不下誰), and "Phoenixes give birth to phoenixes, dragons give birth to dragons, and the offspring of big rats will also learn to dig holes" (鳳生鳳，龍生龍，大耗子的小耗子也會打洞). In addition, Van Oost's proverbs frequently use colloquial markers, further reinforcing their conversational tone. In some of the proverbs he collected, the content is identical to widely known proverbs, but they carry distinct dialectal features, making them dialectal variations of common sayings.

In terms of content, Joseph Van Oost did not organize the proverbs in his collection into categories, but as mentioned earlier, he provided 129 keywords in the appendix to help readers index the proverbs by theme. Below, we highlight the 12 keywords associated with the largest number of proverbs (Figure 7).

An analysis of these top 12 keywords reveals that Van Oost's proverbs are not closely tied to traditional Confucian culture but instead reflect the everyday lives of Chinese farmers in the southwestern region of Inner Mongolia. These proverbs are rooted in specific everyday issues and concerns, revealing the common social phenomena faced by farmers in the area. Themes like "Superstition and Worship" and "Poverty" are the most frequent, illustrating the spiritual beliefs and material struggles of the local population. As a European missionary, Van Oost did not hesitate to label certain Chinese folk beliefs and practices—including Buddhist and Daoist customs—as "superstition" or "heresy". Other keywords, such as "Women" and "Marriage and Conjugal Life", highlight the significance of marriage in rural communities and traditional views on women's roles. Furthermore, the collection includes a wealth of proverbs related to nature and agriculture, such as "Meteorology", "Rain and Predictions", and "Seasons and Temperature", reflecting the farmers' deep dependence on the natural environment and how their livelihoods were directly shaped by weather patterns and agricultural cycles. Keywords like "Horse", "Food", and

"Dog" relate to daily agricultural practices, livestock management, and the food supply, illustrating the practical realities of rural life. While this focus on nature-related proverbs is rarely found in the collections of Joseph de Prémare and Paul Perny, it stands out in Van Oost's work, highlighting the distinctly rural character of his collection.

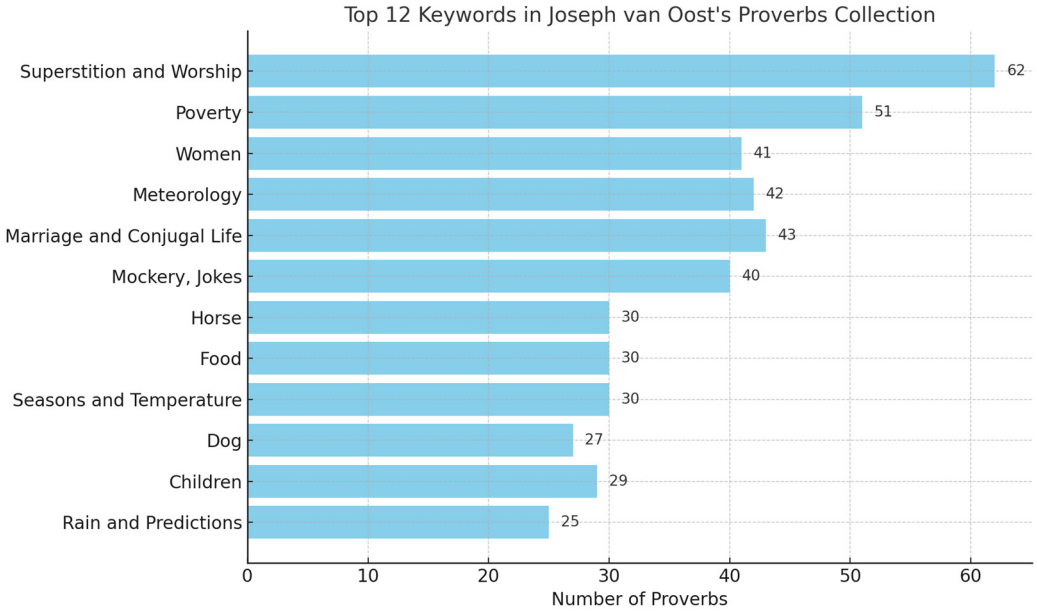


Figure 7. Top 12 keywords in Joseph Van Oost's proverbs collection.

In terms of linguistic style, nearly all the proverbs collected by Joseph Van Oost come from everyday spoken language, with many featuring coarse or earthy expressions. Van Oost took care to document the local vernacular, capturing the direct and vivid language used by the local farmers. He himself explained this in the preface:

"The expression is not always refined; one will find coarse or crude words, down-to-earth imagery, and less noble comparisons. The people are unfamiliar with linguistic refinement; they are colorful if not modest, and they prefer strong terms over delicate ones… I could have made a selection, but that would have compromised the truth. It is important to see the kind of population we are dealing with, as this will give a clearer sense of the challenges faced by the apostolic mission in bringing these people to true civilization". (Van Oost 1918, preface)

Joseph Van Oost's collection of proverbs merits special attention for another reason: many of the proverbs he gathered are not unique to the southwestern region of Inner Mongolia but are also widely used today in northern China, particularly in Shaanxi and northern Shanxi. These proverbs reflect the historical migration known as *Zou Xikou* (走西口). Beginning in the Qing dynasty, thousands of people from Shanxi, Shaanxi, and nearby areas migrated to southwestern Inner Mongolia, renting land from the Mongols for farming. This large-scale migration reshaped the social, economic, and cultural landscape of the region. The migrants, primarily from Shanxi and Shaanxi, brought their farming practices and culture, which gradually blended with the local nomadic traditions, forming a unique immigrant culture (J. An 1999). As a result, the proverbs collected by Van Oost not only exhibit distinct regional traits but also preserve traces of the historical fusion between the Mongolian and Han Chinese communities.

5. The Interpretation of the Chinese Proverbs Included in the Three Collections

The way in which missionaries interpreted Chinese proverbs after collecting them played a crucial role in determining whether Western readers could grasp Chinese life and thought within a different cultural context, thereby facilitating the spread of Catholicism in China. Compared to ordinary Chinese expressions, proverbs are more complex in form

and carry rich cultural meanings, making their translation and explanation particularly challenging. This section examines how three Catholic missionaries—Joseph de Prémare, Paul Perny, and Joseph Van Oost—interpreted Chinese proverbs, using specific examples to illustrate their approaches.

5.1. Translation: Balancing Foreignization and Domestication

From Cicero (106–43 B.C.) to the 20th century, debates in translation theory have long revolved around whether translations should prioritize literal (word-for-word) fidelity or free (sense-for-sense) adaptation. In contemporary translation studies, this linguistic dilemma has evolved into the cultural and political discourse of foreignization versus domestication, terms first introduced by Lawrence Venuti (Venuti 1995) in *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), in his influential 1813 treatise *On the Different Methods of Translating*, presented to the Royal Academy of Sciences in Berlin, illustrated this duality: "Either the translator leaves the author alone as much as possible and moves the reader towards the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer towards the reader" (Venuti 1995, p. 19). Western Catholic missionaries, acting as cultural intermediaries, applied exploratory practices in their translation of Chinese proverbs, navigating between these two strategies.

Initially, missionaries often adhered to a single strategy, often adopting a foreignization approach. This allowed them to retain the original essence of the proverb, enabling readers to appreciate its linguistic and cultural uniqueness. Joseph de Prémare and Paul Perny frequently employed this strategy in their translations, striving to preserve the original form of the proverbs they translated. For example

- Chinese proverb: 禍從口出，病從口入 (Disaster comes from the mouth, illness enters through the mouth).
  Prémare's translation: *Infortunia ex ore exeunt, et morbi per os intrant.*
- Chinese proverb: 光陰如箭，日月如梭 (Time flies like an arrow, the sun and moon move like a weaver's shuttle).
  Perny's translation: *La lumière est semblable* à *une flèche; le soleil et la lune,* à *la navette du tisserand.*

For proverbs that contain metaphorical expressions, foreignization often fails to convey their deeper meaning. For example, the proverb "Ivory does not come from a mouse's mouth" (象牙不出鼠口) was translated by Prémare as *ebur in ore murium non nascitur.* While the literal meaning is preserved, the underlying metaphor—that a wicked person cannot speak virtuous words—remains obscure. Consequently, this approach overlooks the cultural context and metaphorical significance of the proverb.

To address these challenges, missionaries also explored domestication as an alternative strategy. This approach allowed them to move beyond the original structure and focus on conveying the overall message, enabling Western readers to grasp the essence of the proverbs more effectively. A common domestication technique involved replacing Chinese cultural symbols with familiar Western ones. Joseph de Prémare, Paul Perny, and Joseph Van Oost all employed this method at times, selecting analogous proverbs from the target language to reflect the intended meaning of the original Chinese expressions. For instance, the proverb "escaping the wolf's den only to fall into a rat's hole" (正離狼窩，又逢鼠口), which describes moving from one danger to another, was translated by Perny as *Tomber de Charybde en Scylla* (falling from Charybdis into Scylla), using a familiar reference from Greek mythology. This translation makes the concept more accessible to Western readers by linking it to their own cultural knowledge. However, this technique can sometimes obscure the original cultural context. For instance, the proverb "In a lover's eyes, the beloved is as beautiful as Xishi" (情人眼里出西施) was translated by Prémare as *Amor coecus est; quisquis amat ranam, ranam putat esse Dianam* (love is blind; whoever loves a frog sees it as Diana) and by Perny as *Quiconque aime une grenouille en fait une Diane* (whoever loves a frog makes it Diana). Both missionaries replaced Xishi (西施), a legendary beauty in Chinese history, with Diana from Greek mythology. While this sub-

stitution conveyed the same meaning, it relied on Western cultural symbols, preventing readers from understanding the historical and cultural context associated with Xishi, a "culture-specific term" whose definition was proposed by Mona Baker (Baker 1992, p. 21).

However, translating proverbs does not require a strict choice between domestication and foreignization. Unlike proverbs in literary works, proverb collections function more like dictionaries. As such, their translation should aim to preserve the linguistic style and rhetorical features of the proverbs while accurately conveying both their literal and implied meanings. Missionaries gradually recognized that relying solely on either strategy often failed to capture the multi-dimensional meanings of proverbs. Combining both strategies allowed for more nuanced and accurate translations. Technically, this meant integrating literal and free translation methods. Joseph de Prémare rarely used this approach. In Paul Perny's collection, a few proverbs reflect this combined method, where he typically explained the actual meaning first, followed by a literal translation. For example,

- Chinese proverb: 水有源頭，樹有根 (Water has a source, and trees have roots).
  Perny's translation: *Il n'y a pas d'effet sans cause. Littéralement: L'eau vient d'une source, l'arbre a une racine.* (There is no effect without a cause. Literally: Water comes from a source, and trees have roots.)

In contrast, Joseph Van Oost used the combined method for the majority of the proverbs in his collection. He typically started by explaining the literal meaning and then clarified the actual message behind the proverb. For example,

- Chinese proverb: 嫁雞隨雞，嫁狗隨狗 (If you marry a rooster, follow the rooster. If you marry a dog, follow the dog).
  Van Oost's translation: *Si l'on est mariée au coq, on suit le coq. Si l'on est mariée au chien, on suit le chien. La femme doit suivre son mari.* (If one marries a rooster, one follows the rooster. If one marries a dog, one follows the dog. A woman must follow her husband.)

For many sayings that involve puns or double meanings, Van Oost would first provide a word-for-word translation and then thoroughly explain the wordplay and hidden meaning behind the proverb. As a result, his translations are the most comprehensive among the three missionaries.

To a certain extent, the translation of proverbs constitutes a form of cultural translation. By translating proverbs, missionaries actively constructed the Western perception of Chinese folk culture. Across the three collections, the use of combined literal and free translation methods grew increasingly prevalent. This shift illustrates how missionaries progressively found a balance between domestication and foreignization. Such a development goes beyond technical refinement in translation—it reflects a transformation in their attitudes towards Chinese folk culture. Moving beyond simplistic "adaptation" or "detachment," missionaries embraced a neutral yet integrative approach that respected the distinctiveness of the source culture while enhancing its accessibility for the target audience.

5.2. Annotations: Balancing Text and Context

Among the three Catholic missionaries, the work of annotation was primarily undertaken by Joseph Van Oost. He added notes to more than half of the proverbs in his collection after translating them, providing additional background information. These annotations can generally be categorized into four types:

First type: informative annotations. These annotations include explanations of Chinese myths and legends, such as the stories of the "Eight Immortals" (八仙) and the Dragon King (龙王). They also cover traditional Chinese customs like the zodiac (十二生肖), various Chinese festivals, and rituals, and introduce unique plants from the region where Van Oost worked, such as Allium mongolicum (沙蒽) and naked oats (Avena nuda, 莜麦). Additionally, he describes the local lifestyle, including preferences for eating hot meals and using *kang* beds (炕) and fire pits (火盆) for warmth. These annotations span geography,

history, local customs, and folklore, transforming the proverb collection from a simple linguistic tool into an encyclopedia of Northwest China.

Second type: contextual annotations. These annotations explain the practical applications of proverbs and provide examples of their use in specific contexts. For instance, while explaining the proverb "狼走千裏吃肉，狗走千裏吃屎" (The wolf travels a thousand miles for meat, the dog for excrement), Van Oost adds, "When a person seeks to satisfy their passion, they will do anything. This saying is often used casually by people when you try to give them moral advice. For example, if you suggest to an opium smoker that he should quit, as he's ruining his body and soul, he may cynically quote this proverb to dismiss the conversation".

Third type: evaluative annotations. Van Oost occasionally adds personalized evaluations of the content or cultural background of certain proverbs in his annotations. For instance, in several proverbs related to wealth, he repeatedly comments, "Local farmers place an exceptional emphasis on money". In another proverb expressing the idea that "the elderly are left uncared for", he remarks, "This notion runs counter to the Confucian tradition of filial piety". These evaluations reflect Van Oost's personal interpretations of Chinese culture, often revealing a subjective perspective.

Fourth type: cross-referential annotations. This type of annotation explains a proverb by referencing synonymous, near-synonymous, or antonymous proverbs. Van Oost often includes the corresponding proverb numbers from his collection after certain proverbs, enabling readers to compare them and gain a more comprehensive understanding of their meanings through these connections.

Through these four types of annotations, Joseph Van Oost not only explained the meanings of the proverbs but also interpreted them within a broader cultural context. His annotations went beyond providing additional information; they reflected a growing cultural sensitivity during his time in China. This sensitivity is evident in his attention to both the linguistic details of the proverbs and their social functions within local contexts. By combining textual preservation with contextual interpretation, Van Oost's work extended beyond linguistic studies to provide a deeper understanding of Chinese folk culture. Heyndrickx remarked that Van Oost's explanations of local proverbs reveal his deep understanding of the internal logic of both Chinese and Western languages (Heylen 2004, Foreword, p. 12).

An Deming pointed out that during the collection of proverbs, researchers should pay close attention to the contextual information, thoroughly documenting the cultural background, usage scenarios, and expressive effects of proverbs (J. Chen 2019; J. Zhang 2020). This perspective aligns with Van Oost's approach, as he not only documented proverbs but also analyzed their contexts, integrating both textual content and cultural settings. As a result, his collection became more than a linguistic record; it offered a faithful representation of local society and cultural life. In this sense, Van Oost was not just a cultural observer but also an active participant and, at times, a critical interpreter of culture.

6. From Joseph de Prémare to Joseph Van Oost: A Comparative Perspective

Joseph de Prémare, Paul Perny, and Joseph Van Oost, three Catholic missionaries from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, respectively, each compiled a collection of Chinese proverbs. Their works share several common features: unlike Joachim Bouvet and Pierre-Martial Cibot, these missionaries not only preserved the original Chinese text but also included Romanized phonetic transcriptions along with French or Latin translations, making their works true collections of Chinese proverbs in the fullest sense.

By comparing the compilation structure, the collected original Chinese proverbs, and the interpretation methods used in the collections compiled by these three Catholic missionaries, several clear trends emerge:

First, in terms of compilation structure, the collections evolved from being a small section within broader Chinese language studies to becoming standalone volumes. They progressed from simple, unsystematic compilations to more structured and organized works,

with a notable increase in the number of proverbs collected and a growing emphasis on their practical utility.

Second, the approach to collecting Chinese proverbs shifted from solely gathering existing textual sources to integrating textual collections with fieldwork. This eventually led to a collection style resembling early folkloric studies. The type of proverbs collected expanded from purely social-related proverbs to include both social and nature-related themes. The linguistic style transitioned from relatively refined expressions to a mix of refined and colloquial language, ultimately becoming thoroughly vernacular. Dialect proverbs, once absent, became more prominent, reflecting an increasing focus on regional diversity.

Third, in how the missionaries interpreted proverbs, the use of the "literal + free translation" method increased over time, reflecting a gradual effort to strike a balance between domestication and foreignization. Moreover, their approach evolved from simple translations to enriched annotations that provided detailed explanations of the cultural contexts in which the proverbs were used. In other words, the focus shifted from merely preserving the text to balancing both the text and its context.

These changes are naturally linked to the development of Sinology in the 19th century, as well as the emergence and rapid growth of folklore studies and anthropology in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. However, they also reflect the varying missionary strategies of different Catholic orders and the personal evangelization philosophies of individual missionaries.

Joseph de Prémare was a Jesuit and initially aligned with Joachim Bouvet as a core member of the Figurist movement, though they later diverged in their views (Z. Li 2014; Lundbœk 1991). Early Jesuit missions in China followed the Accommodation strategy developed by Matteo Ricci, focusing on engaging with the upper echelons of Chinese society, particularly officials and literati (Mungello 1988, p. 15). The Jesuits learned Chinese, wore Confucian robes, and became "more Chinese than the Chinese (Moureau 2020)". They prioritized learning Mandarin over regional dialects, which is why early Jesuit linguistic research contains little documentation on local dialects (Z. Li 2014, p. 29). In this context, Prémare had limited opportunities to interact with the lower classes, and when collecting Chinese proverbs, he tended to extract them from contemporary vernacular novels.

After the end of the Rites Controversy in the 17th and 18th centuries, the issuance of a ban on missionary activity marked the triumph of Catholic fundamentalism and the failure of the Jesuits' elite engagement strategy. Few members of the literati converted to Catholicism, and the majority of converts came from the lower social classes. The MEP, to which Paul Perny belonged, rejected Chinese rites and firmly opposed any reconciliation between Christian civilization and Confucianism, choosing instead to focus its evangelization efforts on the common people (Guo and Lan 2012). During the century-long prohibition on missionary work, the MEP remained largely restricted to the southwestern regions of China, with its activities shifting from urban centers to rural areas—a trend that continued even after the two Opium Wars in the 19th century (Guo and Lan 2012; Soetens 1997, p. 39). As a member of the MEP and, at one point, the head of the Guizhou diocese, Perny's missionary efforts were primarily directed at impoverished farmers and urban lower-class populations, for whom local dialects and colloquial expressions were the primary means of communication. However, as previously noted, Perny's personal approach to missionary work differed significantly from the broader MEP strategy. He advocated for the development of education and medicine within the diocese and had a deep appreciation for Chinese language and culture. This explains the dual nature of the proverbs in his collection, which includes both proverbs reflecting Confucian thought and vernacular expressions closely tied to the everyday lives and dialects of the local population.

The CICM, to which Joseph Van Oost belonged, carried out missionary activities in northern and northwestern China for more than 80 years during the late Qing and Republican periods, with their longest efforts being in Inner Mongolia. Initially, the Congregation attempted to evangelize Mongolian herders and urban residents. However, due to var-

ious difficulties (Taveirne 2004, p. 256; Y. Zhang 2006, pp. 48–50), these efforts proved unsuccessful. After a series of failures, the mission gradually adjusted its strategy, shifting its focus toward impoverished Han Chinese farmers. The use of land became the primary means of attracting converts. By purchasing or leasing land from Mongolians, the missionaries established new Catholic villages, offering land to poor Han farmers as an incentive to join the Church. The farmers were then organized for agricultural production (Y. Zhang 2006, pp. 54, 58). Joseph Van Oost himself was a strong supporter of this strategy, and he explained the reasons for the shift from evangelizing Mongolians to focusing on the Han Chinese in an article (Van Oost 1914) published in the Canadian French newspaper *Le Devoir*. The implementation of this grassroots approach required missionaries to learn local dialects and colloquial expressions to communicate effectively with their target audience. The southwestern region of Inner Mongolia, located in China's northwest and far removed from political centers, was relatively less influenced by Confucian culture, which gave the local dialect and vernacular expressions a unique folkloric value.

In summary, the evolution of the Chinese proverb collections compiled by Catholic missionaries, from Joseph de Prémare to Joseph Van Oost, mirrors the dynamic shifts in the Catholic Church's missionary strategies and cultural adaptation efforts in China across different historical periods. Broadly speaking, the Catholic mission transitioned from an elite-oriented approach to one focused on rural, lower-class communities. In this context, missionaries' attitudes toward local folk culture, exemplified by proverbs, evolved significantly—from initial disregard to increasing attention, followed by detailed observation and study. Ultimately, they attempted to engage in a deeper dialogue with Chinese folk culture, moving from mere acceptance to active participation.

7. Conclusions

From the 18th to the early 20th century, the Chinese proverb collections compiled by Catholic missionaries emerged as by-products of their missionary endeavors. These collections serve as invaluable cross-cultural documents with significant scholarly importance.

Firstly, these collections hold profound value in fostering cross-cultural exchange. They provide a distinctive perspective on how Western missionaries perceived and interpreted Chinese proverbs through their own cultural frameworks. For these missionaries, China represented both "the religious other" and "the cultural other". Chinese proverbs, in their eyes, embodied moral and cultural symbols of this "otherness". In selecting and compiling proverbs, missionaries acted as cultural "outsiders", documenting and interpreting Chinese everyday language and cultural expressions through the lens of their own historical and cultural contexts. While these collections are not without flaws—such as typographical errors, mistranslations, cultural misunderstandings, and inconsistent categorization—these limitations themselves reflect the interpretive diversity inherent in cross-cultural engagement. They reveal the challenges missionaries faced in understanding a foreign culture while simultaneously opening avenues for the reproduction and reinterpretation of knowledge. In this sense, these collections extended beyond their original purpose, fostering greater dialogue and mutual understanding between cultures.

Secondly, these collections represent a significant achievement in Catholic missionaries' efforts to study the Chinese language and culture, holding substantial value as Sinological documents. From the 16th to the 18th century, Catholic missionaries played a dominant role in the development of Sinology. However, the rise of academic Sinology in the 19th century gradually established its leadership within European Sinological circles. At the same time, Protestant missionary Sinology in English-speaking regions emerged and flourished, seemingly diminishing the prominence of Catholic contributions. Nonetheless, in the specific domain of collecting and translating Chinese proverbs—a field inherently linked to folklore—academic Sinologists made relatively limited contributions. Instead, Catholic missionaries compiled valuable collections of Chinese proverbs, which hold a research value comparable to those produced by Protestant missionaries.

Thirdly, these proverb collections hold academic value in linguistics and folklore. Many of the proverbs gathered by missionaries are deeply rooted in their historical context, capturing the vocabulary and expressions of grassroots communities during specific periods in Chinese history. These proverbs contribute to the corpus of intangible cultural heritage. Additionally, numerous proverbs exhibit distinct regional characteristics. By converting vernacular oral expressions into written forms, the missionaries contributed to the textual documentation and the preservation of regional dialects and folklore. Their efforts have provided contemporary researchers with primary sources for studying the linguistic and cultural traditions of specific regions.

Lastly, the missionaries' efforts in collecting and translating Chinese proverbs not only influenced subsequent missionaries—Protestant missionary William Scarborough, for instance, explicitly acknowledged drawing on Perny's work in his *A Collection of Chinese Proverbs*—but also inspired Chinese scholars to explore the proverbs and folk literature, particularly through methods akin to fieldwork. Missionaries were ahead of their Chinese counterparts in recognizing the value of folk culture, and their Chinese proverb collections fostered a scholarly dialogue with intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement[8] (Cui 2019). This exchange ultimately contributed to the development of modern Chinese proverb studies and advanced the broader field of folk literature research.

Today, with a well-established international framework for paremiology, these missionary collections deserve further in-depth research from various angles. Such research can illuminate the diverse historical contexts in which Westerners engaged with Chinese proverbs and underscore the important role these proverbs played as cultural bridges in Sino-Western communication.

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Notes

1 Most Western paremiologists believe that proverbs are not created by the folk but rather by an individual (Mieder 2015; Whiting 1931). However, Chinese scholars generally maintain that Chinese proverbs were originally the product of collective creation.

2 This work was originally titled *Tian Xue Ben Yi* (天學本義, *The True Meaning of Heaven*), where "Heaven" refers to Catholicism. Written during the height of the Rites Controversy, the text adopts the traditional Chinese commentary and annotation format to provide a Catholic theological interpretation of references to "Heaven" and "God" in the Chinese classics. It continues Matteo Ricci's tradition of engaging with Chinese classics and publishing in Chinese. Multiple manuscript copies of the book exist (Q. Li 2014), and the version referenced in this article is housed in the National Library of France (Catalog number: Chinois 7161) (Bouvet 1703).

3 The ten thematic groups are as follows: on princes, ministers, and courtiers; on spouses; on women; on children; on wisdom and the sage; on vice and virtue; on friends and friendship; on the heart; on pleasures; and general proverbs.

4 For detailed information on Paul Perny's life and activities in China, see (Guo and Zheng 2017).

5 The Vicariate Apostolic of Southwestern Mongolia was erected in 1883. For more information on the missionary history of the CICM in Inner Mongolia, see (Taveirne 2004; Y. Zhang 2006).

6 For detailed information on Joseph Van Oost's life and activities in China, see the preface by Jeroom Heyndrickx in the work by Ann Heylen (Heylen 2004).

[7] For detailed information on the thematic classification of proverbs in *A Collection of Chinese Proverbs* by William Scarborough (1841–1894) and *The Proverbs and Common Sayings from the Chinese* by Arthur Henderson Smith (1845–1932), see (Bian 2023; Cui 2019).

[8] The May Fourth Movement (五四運動) was a Chinese cultural and anti-imperialist political movement that originated from student protests in Beijing on 4 May 1919. As a continuation of the New Culture Movement (新文化運動), it opposed Confucian culture and championed a new cultural vision, leaving a profound impact on China's intellectual landscape. Led by progressive intellectuals, the movement promoted the vernacular literature and explored the cultural and social lives of ordinary people. Chinese scholars only began to delve deeply into folk culture after the May Fourth Movement. In the study of Chinese proverbs and idiomatic expressions, contemporary scholarship often considers Guo Shaoyu(郭紹虞)'s 1921 article *A Study of Proverbs* (諺語的研究) as a foundational work in the field. For details, see (Hung 1993, pp. 227–8).

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