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Reshaping Abraham's Image in Early Qing China: A Comparative Study of Catholic and Jewish Interpretations

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Abstract: In the early Qing dynasty, the Jesuit missionary Louis de Poirot's (He Qingtai 賀清泰, 1735–1814) Chinese rendition of the Bible, *Guxin Shengjing* (*The Ancient and New Testament*) (古新聖經), reshaped the figure of Abraham. Contrary to the depiction by Chinese Jews of the era, de Poirot portrayed Abraham as a sage, resonating with the traditional Chinese concept of the “five cardinal relationships” (rulers to subjects, fathers to sons, husbands to wives, among siblings, and between friends), and an exemplar of virtue and faith, devoid of human flaws. Key differences emerged in translating Abraham's name, religious stature, and national identity, influenced by distinct belief systems, attitudes towards Confucian culture, and political dynamics. Analyzing these Catholic and Jewish perspectives on Abraham enhances our understanding of the Bible's contextualization and informs contemporary religious localization.

Keywords: Abraham; Louis de Poirot; *Guxin Shengjing*; Chinese Jews; Cultural Contextualization



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1. Introduction

In the tapestry of world religions, the figure of Abraham stands as a pivotal symbol, revered across diverse faiths for his spiritual significance and ethical virtues. The early Qing dynasty in China, marked by cultural and religious pluralism, witnessed a unique interplay of this biblical patriarch's image within Catholicism and Judaism. This paper explores the contrasting representations of Abraham by Jesuit missionary Louis de Poirot and the Jewish community in Qing China, delving into the intricate intersections of religious narratives and cultural contexts.

The Qing era (1644–1912) was a time of complex socio-political dynamics in China, characterized by the Manchu rulers' efforts to assert control while grappling with internal and external challenges. This period saw the resurgence and transformation of Confucianism, which maintained its grip as the dominant intellectual and ethical doctrine. Concurrently, Buddhism and Taoism continued to influence the spiritual and cultural landscape. Into this milieu blossomed Christianity, brought by European missionaries, and a small but resilient Jewish community, which had been present in China for centuries.

Louis de Poirot, a Jesuit missionary, evangelized in Beijing during the reigns of Emperors Qianlong and Jiaqing (1736–1821). Unlike his predecessors, who primarily addressed the scholarly elite mastering classical Chinese, he reached out to ordinary people using the colloquial Beijing dialect. His translation of the Bible, *Guxin Shengjing* (*The Ancient and New Testament*), notable for its Beijing vernacular, sought to demystify Scripture for all social strata, particularly the small-scale traders (“引車賣漿”). His work, encompassing around 1.5 million characters with over 300,000 dedicated to annotations, aimed to contextualize Christian theology within a Confucian framework. The annotations were his hermeneutics, an approach rooted in Catholic exegetical tradition and tailored by de Poirot to fit within a Confucian context, either clarifying the obscure biblical texts with Confucian terminology to facilitate the access of the foreign faith to the general populace or indicating

the coming of Jesus with biblical typology. *Guxin Shengjing*, de Poirot's vernacular Bible, enjoys a slight difference in format from the traditional Catholic version, but the content remains consistent with all biblical versions.¹ His approach is evident in his interpretation of Abraham in Genesis (chapters 11–25), which was divided into three books: “化成之經” (*The Book of Creation*), “造成經” (*The Book of Transformation*), and “救出之經” (*The Book of Salvation*). De Poirot's annotations on Abraham address interpretative doubts,² appraise his conduct, and seek to resolve conflicts between Confucian and Catholic views. In addition to following traditional Christian hermeneutics, de Poirot focuses more on crafting the Confucian image of Abraham by contextualizing the biblical lines in ancient Chinese culture. Parallel to the Catholic missionary efforts, the Jewish community, another branch of Abraham's religious tradition in China, primarily centered in Kaifeng, continued to practice their faith and interpret their religious texts. Although the Jewish community does not produce a Chinese version of the Bible, their interpretation of Abraham and other biblical figures, reflected in various historical documents such as steles and couplets, provides a unique lens, contributing to Chinese exegesis of the Scripture. Influenced by the surrounding Confucian and Buddhist cultures, these interpretations present a distinct portrayal of Abraham, diverging significantly from the Catholic depiction.

The comparative study of these two representations of Abraham in the Confucian context of Qing China is more than merely an academic pursuit of historical interest. It provides valuable insights into the broader questions of religious adaptation, cultural integration, and the dynamics of faith in a multi-religious society. The way Abraham is depicted by Louis de Poirot and the Jewish community reveals much about the strategies employed by different religious groups to establish their presence, gain acceptance, and foster dialogue with the dominant culture. Both the Jewish and Catholic images of Abraham are depicted in the Confucian culture and based on the same biblical verses;³ however, owing to a multitude of internal and external influences, significant divergences are observed; thus, a comparative analysis of these perspectives not only deepens the understanding of Abraham's religious image within the Confucian context but also enhances insights into the localization strategies of foreign religions.

Previous research on *Guxin Shengjing* has focused on its translation history (Zheng 2012), de Poirot's bibliography and translation process (Song 2015), linguistic characteristics (Li 2013; Zheng 2015), and source text analysis (Song 2022). However, there has been limited exploration of the translated text's content, except for Li Shixue's study of the first two chapters of *The Book of Creation* to explore the continuation and innovation of de Poirot's exegetical tradition (Li 2016) and Huang Wei's study on wisdom literature (Huang 2020). Most scholarly attention has been focused on a Protestant viewpoint (Zhang 2021),⁴ overlooking the Catholic interpretation of Abraham, which, unlike Protestantism in China, does not focus on biographical narratives of biblical figures but on preaching through the doctrinal writings as they do worldwide. This study examines de Poirot's portrayal of Abraham within the Catholic tradition against a Confucian backdrop, juxtaposed with the Chinese Jewish perspective, to comprehensively understand Abraham's representation and the diverse exegetical traditions within the Confucian context.

In undertaking this exploration, the paper aims to fill a gap in existing scholarship, which has predominantly focused on the translation history of *Guxin Shengjing* and the linguistic characteristics of de Poirot's work. There has been less emphasis on the content of the translated text and its cultural implications, particularly in comparison with the Jewish interpretations of the same period. By examining the construction of Abraham's image within the Catholic and Jewish traditions against the backdrop of Qing China's Confucian context, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in contextualizing religious figures and the localization of foreign religions.

2. Catholic Depiction of Abraham in a Confucian Milieu

De Poirot's *Guxin Shengjing* casts Abraham in a Confucian light, portraying him as a “sage” (聖人), embodying the “five cardinal relationships” (五倫) and filial piety (孝道)

in traditional Confucianism. This interpretation emphasizes Abraham's moral excellence and presents him as a faultless model (完人) in line with Confucian ethics by justifying his "moral conduct" (德行) deficiencies. In the Confucian paradigm, there is a special emphasis on Abraham being utilized as "an exemplar of loyalty and faithfulness" (忠信榜樣), as upheld in the Catholic tradition.

2.1. Abraham as a Confucian Sage within the "Five Cardinal Relationships"

De Poirot's annotations in *Guxin Shengjing* highlight the importance of the "five cardinal relationships", suggesting divine repercussions for reversing these roles (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 58). His portrayal of Abraham, a virtuous individual, reflects these relationships, showcasing virtues like "filial piety" (孝) towards parents, "humility" (謙讓) towards siblings, marital harmony, "benevolence" (仁愛) towards friends, and "loyalty" (忠) to God, which in Confucianism means "loyalty" to monarchy.

Abraham's departure from his homeland for the Promised Land is framed as a filial duty. According to Confucianism, leaving one's parents and traveling a great distance is a serious act of disobedience, for which a great number of annotations are added by Louis de Poirot to justify that Abraham is a "filial son" because he secures his elderly father's consent and assures of his brother's presence to care for their parents, acting in a manner congruent with filial duty (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 49). This interpretation aligns with Confucian ideals, making Abraham's actions more palatable to the common people. De Poirot deliberately and subtly introduces his ingenious notion that "divine authority" (天主權) supersedes "parental authority" (父權), that is, prioritizing "loyalty to God" (對天主忠信) over "filial piety towards parents" (望父母孝順) (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 49), asserting that "a father's power is limited to guiding children towards goodness and submitting to God's will" (父親的權但在(只在)引領兒童于善, 遵從天主的旨意) (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 49). By substituting the subject to be obeyed, Abraham's act of leaving his home, in accordance with the command of "God", is, therefore, a legitimate act. De Poirot portrays Abraham's "filial piety" by clarifying readers' doubts about his leaving his parents for the Promised Land and, at the same time, emphasizing the priority of divine authority.

Abraham's humility towards his brother is exemplified in his decision to part ways with his nephew Lot, where he cedes the better portion of land. Abraham states, "Let us not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are close relatives" (Genesis 13:8). Demonstrating a strong sense of familial duty, Abraham graciously and willingly allows Lot to choose the better land parcel for himself. This act is particularly significant in the hierarchical Qing society, which showcases Abraham's emphasis on "mutual love and harmony" (彼此親愛和睦); younger brothers are to obey the elder. De Poirot also commends Abraham's adherence to the "path of marital harmony" (夫妻和睦之道) and not being influenced by selfish desires in regard to his consent to Sarah's decision about Hagar.⁵ When three guests visit, Abraham humbly stands by their side, displaying "his benevolence, diligence, and generous treatment of them" (仁愛勤勞、厚待賓客). He is portrayed as a "benevolent and humble sage" (謙遜仁愛的賢人) (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 67).

Although de Poirot does not directly address Abraham's relationship with the monarch, he appropriates the relationship between God and Abraham to illustrate a similar dynamic. For instance, the term "reward" (賞) is used by God when granting Abraham the land of Canaan, which is a common term used between the emperor and his subjects (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 51). De Poirot employs the relationship of ruler and subject to signify the relationship between God and Abraham. Moreover, the author refers to God as the "Lord" or "Master" (主子) (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 66), reflecting the concept of viewing God as a "monarch" (君) and "master" (主), thus replacing the Confucian principle of "loyalty to the ruler" (忠君) with "loyalty to God" (侍主).

2.2. Abraham as a Paragon of Virtue

De Poirot endeavors to portray an idealized, unblemished image of Abraham. The ambiguous nature of biblical narrative provides him with ample interpretive space. The Bible depicts its characters, including Abraham, as complex beings filled with human emotions, desires, and flaws. As Legge stated, despite being considered a virtuous man, Abraham also has moments of weakness and flaws, which could be seen in Abraham referring to his wife as his sister (Legge 2012). However, De Poirot disagrees and explains relentlessly, “During that time, it was common to refer to a niece as a sister” (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 49), “In ancient times, the descendants of ancestors were considered their own children, and a niece from an uncle’s side was commonly referred to as a sister” (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 76). This argument may delude readers for a moment but holds little weight as Abraham continues to refer to Sarah as his sister even after they have been married for many years. This approach, while somewhat tenuous, maintains the image of Abraham as an unblemished role model and is obviously formed from a Catholic perspective.

Louis de Poirot’s depiction of a flawless image extends to other characters, like Sarah and Lot. Sarah denies her laughter when overhearing the angels’ promise, which is obviously a deception, and de Poirot explains that it is just a result of “saving face” (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 68). He also justifies Sarah’s decision to send away Hagar and her son by saying that “Parents should scrutinize their children’s associations to avoid future disgrace” (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 79). This perspective seeks to absolve Sarah from a parental standpoint. In a similar manner, de Poirot uses the expression “like speaking in a dream” (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 71) to rationalize Lot’s actions of sacrificing his daughters to men from Sodom for fornication, attempting to mitigate the moral implications.

The depiction of Abraham as a faultless person aligns with the Confucian sage model, and Louis de Poirot often entitles Abraham as a “sage” in annotations.⁶ While the concept of a sage referring to Abraham may differ from that of a Confucian sage in terms of belief systems and many connotations, they share an unblemished moral conduct as a defining characteristic.

2.3. Abraham as an Exemplar of Faithfulness

De Poirot underscores the Catholic system and its values, as well as catering to traditional Chinese culture. The *Creed* in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* highlights Abraham as an exemplary figure of faith among Israel’s forefathers, as stated in the narrative of Sarah’s pregnancy or offering Jacob, and as the “father” of all believers (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2012, p. 40). De Poirot consistently highlights Abraham’s faith in his annotations, affirming that “he puts his trust in God’s omnipotence” (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 49) and “believes in relying faithfully on God” (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 50). He translates Abraham’s “righteousness” (義) as “loyalty” (忠義), “faithfulness” (忠心) (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 56), or “trustworthiness” (忠信) (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 49). In the narrative of God’s request for Abraham to leave his homeland in Genesis 12:1, de Poirot adds a note to emphasize that God speaks to Abraham without explicitly stating where he should go, which is a test of Abraham’s faith. As a result of his loyalty, God promises to “reward him, exalt him, and make him the father of all faithful people in the holy church” (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 49). Owing to God’s blessings upon Abraham, he holds firm to his beliefs and refrains from accepting any possessions from the king of Sodom to avoid the king claiming credit for making Abraham wealthy. De Poirot’s commentary highlights that Abraham’s spoken words stem from his faith and his belief in God’s gifts, which makes him “despise the earthly king’s rewards” (輕看世俗國王的賞) (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 55).

Abraham’s loyalty and faithfulness to God are further exemplified in his veneration for Him. After separating from Lot, God appears to Abraham and grants him a blessing. As a result, Abraham constructs an altar to the Lord, a gesture that reflects his “veneration” (恭敬) and gratitude towards God; whenever he receives God’s grace, he will “construct an altar”, which is in line with Catholic teachings. This coheres with the depiction of Abraham in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

In summary, de Poirot's portrayal of Abraham in *Guxin Shengjing* weaves Catholic doctrine into the Confucian framework, presenting Abraham as a sage who embodies essential Confucian virtues. This approach highlights the compatibility of Catholic values with traditional Chinese culture, facilitating the localization of Christianity in the Qing dynasty.

3. Jewish Depiction of Abraham: A Comparative Analysis

The Jewish portrayal of Abraham during the Ming and Qing dynasties contrasts with the Confucian-influenced image created by de Poirot. While de Poirot's Catholic representation highlights Abraham's ethical virtues and role as a "father of faith", Jewish interpretations in the same Confucian-dominated cultural context emphasize Abraham's religious significance, particularly as the founder of Judaism. This divergence is evident in several aspects:

3.1. Varied Translations of Abraham's Name and the Influence of Buddhism

Louis de Poirot utilizes transliteration to translate the name "Abraham", while Jews in China combine transliteration and semantic translation in translating his name and adopt Buddhist terminology in the choice of Chinese characters.

De Poirot transcribes the name "Abraham" as "Yabalang" (亞巴郎) (a single form) or "Yabalahang" (亞巴拉杭) (a plural form) without any significant meaning attached to the choice of Chinese characters besides the character "lang" (郎), which highlights Abraham's male identity. The Jewish community, instead of a straightforward transliteration or a purely semantic translation, utilizes a combination of transliteration and semantic translation, resulting in a unique and meaningful rendition of the name. This strategy reflects their intention to introduce and emphasize Jewish beliefs through the selection of terms derived from Buddhist vocabulary. In their inscriptions, Abraham is called "Awuarhat" (阿無羅漢) (1489 stele), with "Awu" (阿無) as a transliteration and "arhat" (羅漢) a free translation that emphasizes Abraham's identity, which connotes a resemblance to a Buddhist figure. The character "wu" (無) in "Awu", denoting negation in Buddhism, symbolizes Abraham's rejection of polytheism and his founding of monotheism. The term "arhat", while not directly equating Abraham with a Buddhist Arhat,⁷ emphasizes his esteemed position in Jewish theology.⁸ This use of Buddhist terminology is strategic, facilitating understanding and acceptance among those familiar with Buddhism during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Furthermore, the Jewish descriptions of Abraham as "enlightened in the profound mysteries" (悟此幽玄), "consulting the will of the true heaven" (參贊真天) (1489 stele), and "understanding the unity of heaven and humanity" (悟天人合一之旨) (1663 stele) reflect Buddhist influences. This approach is aligned with the "Three Teachings Harmonious as One" (三教合一) movement during the Song and Ming Dynasties, the period before Qing, where Confucianism absorbed Buddhist and Taoist elements.

In contrast, de Poirot, following Matteo Ricci's Jesuit tradition, deliberately minimizes the influence of Buddhism in his translations. The Jesuit missionary strategy is to respect Confucianism while downplaying Buddhism, avoiding confusion between Catholic and Buddhist beliefs. These result in the absence of Buddhist terminology in his biblical translations. Moreover, to facilitate their missionary work, de Poirot refrains from borrowing the lexicon of Buddhism, which may mislead the public to mix Catholics with Buddhism.

3.2. Religious Status: "Father of Faith" vs. "Founder of Faith"

In the context of Abrahamic religions, Catholicism and Judaism revere Abraham. Yet, their portrayals diverge significantly regarding his religious status. Louis de Poirot's depiction, in line with Catholic tradition, highlights Abraham as a paragon of faith. Conversely, amidst diverse interpretations, the Chinese Jewish community predominantly venerates Abraham as the founder of Judaism.

De Poirot's annotations reflect the Catholic viewpoint that positions Judaism as the precursor to Christianity, with the Old Testament seen as a prologue to the New Testament. This perspective is evident in his interpretation of biblical typology, signaling the advent of Jesus⁹ and the doctrine of the trinity within the *Old Testament* (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 67). In this narrative, Abraham is esteemed as the "father of believers", a figure central to the history of human salvation, while salvation for all humanity stems from faith in the trinity of God. Thus, both Jews and Gentiles can claim Abraham as their father based on their shared faith (Wang 2015), ultimately leading to Jesus. This portrayal facilitates Catholic evangelization by presenting Abraham as a universally accessible figure of faith, resonating with both Catholics and prospective believers. It is believed that the history of human salvation begins with Abraham (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2012, p. 266)¹⁰, from whom Jesus is descended. As an evangelistic religion, *Guxin Shengjing* is centered on missionary work with Catholics and prospective believers as the target readers; thus, portraying Abraham as a representative figure among the Gentiles is more easily accepted by the public.

On the other hand, Chinese Jews emphasize Abraham's foundational role in establishing Judaism as their ancestor among the chosen people. Their connection to Abraham is primarily rooted in blood. However, their adherence to the laws matters more in relating themselves as descendants of Abraham, which implies that when introducing their faith to the public, it is of vital importance to address Judaism rather than Abraham. Moreover, Judaism is not evangelistic, and thus, it is sufficient for their literature in China to acquaint the public with the Jewish faith, underscoring Abraham's monotheism and rejection of idol worship, the distinctive features of the main religions in China. This emphasis is reflected in the Jewish portrayal of Abraham as the "founder of Judaism",¹¹ accentuating his pivotal position in religious history¹² and his discernment of divine truths, heaven (天), and the Tao (道) in the Chinese context. This representation aligns with the historical characteristics of Judaism, portraying Abraham as a figure who, within a polytheistic context, recognized God as supreme and worshipped Jehovah exclusively, establishing a unique, idol-free worship. Within Judaism, Abraham is portrayed as the "father of believers", which primarily reflects the desire of the biblical authors and scholars to encourage the Israelites to look to the Lord during their exile and to restore their faith as descendants of Abraham, which differs from the emphasis in Catholicism on faith in the trinity God.

Due to the limited space in the steles, Jews in China are bound to introduce the most featured elements of Judaism to the public, and as for Abraham, his role as "founder of Judaism" is of significance, which embodies the most significant features reflecting the historical characteristics of Judaism. "Founder of Judaism" encompasses two aspects. First, Abraham establishes monotheism within polytheism, and Jews in China keep their tradition in the same context. In the inscriptions, Abraham recognizes God as "supreme and without equal" (輕清在上, 至尊無對) (1489 stele) and emphasizes "the importance of wholehearted devotion and reverence" (一心侍奉, 敬謹精專) (1489 stele). He chooses to worship Jehovah alone as his object of faith, refraining from worshipping other gods by calling upon the name of Jehovah alone (Genesis 12:8). Second, Abraham establishes his worship without idols. The Jewish inscriptions state that Abraham holds that "formless images provide no blessing" (像態無祐) (1489 stele), and therefore, his God is "not shaped in an image" (不塑於形象) (1489 stele). Worship without idols was unique during both Abraham's time and the period of Chinese Judaism. Nevertheless, it was accepted in the Chinese context because their form of idol-less worship did not affect the surrounding beliefs and was different from the "iconoclastic movements" during the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom era (Lee 2016, p. 189).

The Chinese Jewish community's reverence for Abraham is also symbolized by the construction of a Holy Ancestral Temple dedicated to him, highlighting his elevated religious significance. This temple, adjacent to that of Moses and with the largest incense burner, signifies Abraham's esteemed status within their religious tradition.

3.3. Differences in the Construction of National Identity

While Catholicism emphasizes universal salvation, a concept predominantly manifested in the *New Testament*, de Poirot's translation acknowledges Abraham as a virtuous foreigner in Canaan, tracing his lineage to Jesus. This portrayal underscores the ancestral and spiritual connection between Abraham and the Christian faith, and Chinese readers also regard him as an alien in a foreign religion.

In contrast, Jewish belief traditionally regards Abraham as the progenitor of Israel's religious and national identity. However, Chinese Jewish sources place greater emphasis on his role as the founder of their faith, integrating him into Chinese genealogy as the "19th generation descendant of Pangu¹³ and Adam (盘古阿耽)". This depiction subtly shifts the focus from Abraham's role as a national founder to a religious one, aligning with the Chinese ancestral narrative and downplaying aspects of Jewish national identity.

The genealogy of Chinese Jews, encompassing figures like Noah, Moses, and Ezra, starts with Pangu and Adam, reflecting a unique syncretic approach that combines Jewish religious heritage with traditional Chinese ancestry. God declares, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6). Abraham, hailed as the first individual to undergo circumcision, is also acknowledged as the recipient of all divine promises, which are then inherited by his offspring. Catholicism extends the promises to the New Testament era, the descendants of Abraham, the offspring of David, and ultimately to Jesus, along with those who have faith in Jesus. Traditional Judaism, on the other hand, prioritizes Abraham's role as the progenitor of the Israelite nation, a perspective not reflected in the inscriptions of Chinese Jews. Abraham's unique status as the founder is not emphasized because Chinese Jews put Pangu and Adam on the same level, aligning with the Chinese ancestral storyline that depicts Pangu as the ancestor of humankind and thus downplaying Jewish identity as a nation. This approach highlights the shared lineage with the Han Chinese and distinguishes their unique religious identity, subtly incorporating elements akin to Confucianism.

In summary, the depiction of Abraham's religious status in Catholicism and Judaism in early Qing China illustrates how these religions adapt their narratives to resonate with their audience's cultural and religious milieu. While Catholicism portrays Abraham as a universal "father of faith", Judaism emphasizes his foundational role as the "founder of Judaism", reflecting these religious communities' distinct objectives and theological emphases.

4. The Image of Abraham and Interaction Patterns with Judeo-Christian Culture

The portrayal of Abraham within Judeo-Christian traditions diverges significantly due to their unique developmental trajectories while sharing a common origin. In China, this divergence is further shaped by the interaction between these religious cultures and Chinese society, particularly concerning Confucianism.

While both Chinese Jews and Christians endeavor to align with Confucianism, the extent to which they are permeated by Confucian values differs. In the Catholic context, as exemplified by Louis de Poirot's work, Abraham's image is crafted to align with Confucian ideals. This approach stems from the Jesuit strategy of "wearing the clothes of Confucian scholars" and adaptation to Confucian culture, aiming to demonstrate the compatibility between Catholic beliefs and Confucian values. De Poirot's portrayal of Abraham within this framework underscores his role as a moral exemplar, resonating with Confucian virtues. Conversely, the Jewish community in China, deeply versed in Confucian texts, with the Four Books and Five Classics as examples, and engaged in the civil service examinations to attain academic success and official recognition, developed a solid connection to Confucianism. This attachment is reflected in their portrayal of biblical figures like Moses, who is depicted as akin to a Confucian sage, similar to the revered figure of Abraham in de Poirot's interpretation. However, their representation of Abraham focuses more on his status as the "founder of the faith", placing less emphasis on his ethical character when compared to the Catholic portrayal.

Moreover, the interaction between these religious communities and Confucianism reveals varying power dynamics and cultural policies. Catholicism, characterized by its exclusivist beliefs, adopts a selective approach to integrating Confucian elements. Louis de Poirot's *Guxin Shengjing* illustrates this selective borrowing, aligning aspects of Abraham's image with Confucian ideals while remaining staunchly Catholic in core doctrinal areas. This approach is evident in de Poirot's critique of Qing funeral practices as contradicting Catholic doctrine, reflecting a tendency to judge Confucian customs through a Catholic lens. When Abraham purchases a burial place for Sarah, Louis de Poirot's commentary emphasizes the "deceptive practices" of those who "confuse the heretics do their best to spend money recklessly, bury the corpse in, or look for a good place, to pick a good date; after the burial, or offer food, wine offerings, burnt vessels, satin, paper, silver, clothes, to do this falsehood, and to do so, kowtow again and again" (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 85). Louis de Poirot regards these early Qing burial customs as the actions of "the uneducated" rather than the actions of "the enlightened and virtuous." De Poirot applies a similar methodology to his explanation of Abraham's departure from his parents. While he uses the premise that "God's authority supersedes the authority of parents" to support his argument, he analyzes Confucianism through the lens of Catholicism and employs Catholic criteria to make judgments without regard for how the audience may perceive them. When taking the context of the Rites Controversy into consideration, it is easier to see de Poirot's endeavor to both selectively borrow from the Confucian tradition and also account for the hardline of the Vatican. When de Poirot worked in Qianlong's palace as a court painter, he operated within the prevailing influence of the Rites Controversy. On the one hand, Qianlong issued an official ban on preaching in China, prompting de Poirot to engage with the lower classes through the dissemination of his vernacular Bible and efforts to adhere to Confucian traditions. On the other hand, the Vatican left no tolerance for Chinese rituals in the Jesuits' missionary work; thus, de Poirot needed to be cautious in dealing with certain Confucian practices, such as funeral rites.

In contrast, Chinese Jews tend to eschew direct conflict with Confucian principles, finding themselves less dominant than mainstream Confucian culture. Their historical records often downplay aspects of Jewish doctrine that might clash with Confucian values, such as the emphasis on the prosperity of Abraham's descendants or the practice of circumcision, which contradicts the Confucian precept of preserving one's physical body intact. While Jewish doctrine sees the prosperity of Abraham's descendants as a divine promise, Chinese Jews rarely emphasize this in their historical records. The Jews' "peaceful life and content work" (安居樂業) is attributed by some to the emperor's policies. Furthermore, the act of circumcision, which is a notable external marker for Jews, is not included in the historical records of Chinese Jews because it contradicts the Confucian tradition that "Your physical person, from head to toe, one's body, is received from one's parents; it should not be harmed or damaged." Therefore, the Jewish portrayal of Abraham in China is somewhat more subdued regarding Confucian influence, focusing primarily on his religious significance rather than his virtues or saintliness. This reflects a reverence for Abraham as the foundational figure of their religion, distinct from the Catholic inclination to mold him into a Confucian-like figure of moral perfection. Whether it is the choice of translation or the construction of identity, it reflects the Jewish admiration for Abraham as the founder of their religion.

In addition to the predominant religious groups like Confucianism and Buddhism, a plethora of religious uprisings such as the White Lotus, Taiping Rebellion, and Qianlong's persecution of soul-stealing sorcerers emerged, forming a perilous and dynamic religious landscape for the two religious minorities. They could only safeguard themselves from government repression by aligning with the official ideological system of Confucianism.

5. Conclusions

Despite facing challenges in its publication, Louis de Poirot's *Guxin Shengjing* represents a strategic attempt by early Qing dynasty Catholic missionaries to target a broader au-

dience beyond the scholar-official class. His hermeneutics are for the public, an approach similar to that of Chinese Jews, who also reveal their faith in the steles to ordinary people. The mediums of the Jesuit texts and Jewish steles are different, even though “the public” is used here. For de Poirrot, “the public” denotes the audience for whom the Scriptures are translated. It refers to all social strata, particularly the small-scale traders, large in number but illiterate. For Jews, “the public” refers to the Confucian scholars for whom the Jewish steles are carved, according to their beliefs. They are well-educated, and the style of the stele writings caters to them well. However, despite these differences in mediums, the depiction of Abraham remains consistent. Firstly, the Jewish stele depicted Moses as a Confucian sage, akin to de Poirrot’s depiction of Abraham, illustrating the profound influence of Confucianism on Jewish culture. Secondly, Buddhist-infused symbols infiltrated the daily life of Qing China, and the public, both the elite and the illiterate, were inevitably affected by Buddhism, even though they could personally choose to distance themselves from or embrace it. Thirdly, the main difference in depicting Abraham of both parties lies in their attitude towards the surrounding religions, like Buddhism and Taoism, which was discussed in the first chapter in part three, stating that Jews held true to the “Three Teachings Harmonious as One” while equalizing Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, leaving space for Judaism in China. However, “de Poirrot, following Matteo Ricci’s Jesuit tradition, deliberately minimized the influence of Buddhism in his translations.” Hence, different mediums do exist, but that could not contribute to the differences in depicting Abraham.

For de Poirrot, Abraham was portrayed as a Confucian figure, exemplary and flawless, of loyalty and faithfulness, the portrait facilitating his approach. For the Jews, Abram was pictured in the frame of Judaism, introducing him as the founder of faith. The contrasting representations of Abraham in the Catholic and Jewish contexts within China highlight the complex dynamics of religious adaptation and cultural integration. They reveal how religious figures are reshaped to resonate with diverse audiences, reflecting the accommodation of indigenous cultural values and preserving distinct religious identities.

The Jewish and Christian efforts to adapt religious practices offer insights into the ongoing process of the Sinicization of religions in China. Firstly, when introducing any religion into a new culture, it is bound to actively reconcile foreign religious doctrines with indigenous cultural values and traditions in order to gain official acceptance. It matters little if the religion is evangelistical or not. Secondly, the approaches to adaptation vary depending on belief systems and target audiences. Chinese Jews emphasized the different facets of Abraham compared with de Poirrot. Thirdly, the adaptation approach serves its religious objectives by striking a balance between compromise and maintaining spiritual authenticity, ensuring adherence to the core tenets of the religion.

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Notes

- ¹ Louis de Poirrot translated the Bible from the Vulgate version, adding his own titles and breaking up some books into multiple parts.

- 2 The explanations provided by Louis de Poirot concerning the meaning of Abraham's name (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 63), the rite of circumcision (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 64), the use of typology to explain Jesus as the Savior (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 63), and the explanation of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 64), which are of crucial importance in addressing the doubts and inquiries of those outside the realm of Christianity.
- 3 The primary distinction between the Catholic Bible and the Jewish Bible is the depiction of Jesus in the *New Testament*, which is exclusively recorded in the Catholic Bible. Though they both share the *Old Testament*, there are some insignificant disparities. Nevertheless, the chapters pertaining to Abraham in the two versions are the same.
- 4 Zhang Yafei, through her compilation of biographies of Protestant saints, has summarized how Christians shape the figure of Abraham in the Chinese context. They attribute to him the virtues and knowledge of a Confucian sage, as well as the faith of a Catholic believer. This amalgamation of the concepts of "sage" and "saint" represents a collective portrayal of Abraham by Christians (Zhang 2021, pp. 265–82).
- 5 The expression "master" corresponds to "servant" in Louis de Poirot's translation, where Abraham addresses God as "master" and Abraham's maids are called "servants." As to the harmony between husband and wife, Louis de Poirot places special emphasis on the ethical relationship, stating that "the husband is the master of the wife." Thus, in his translation, Sarah refers to Abraham as "my master", and in this regard, Louis de Poirot praises Sarah's virtue in his commentary (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 67). These terms used between husband and wife further emphasized the stigma of ancient China, where wives were inferior to husbands. This translation should be of great benefit to his missionary work. First, this is in line with the three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues. Secondly, praising Sara's humility is conducive to maintaining family harmony among believers (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 60).
- 6 Louis de Poirot referred to multiple ancestors, including Abraham and Jacob, as "sages", but he referred to Matthew as a "saint" (Louis de Poirot 2014, pp. 94–95).
- 7 "Arhat" occupies the initial position in Hinayana Buddhism's four sacred positions, succeeding Pratyeka, Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and Buddhas. However, it does not regenerate into the highest fruition of the three realms and six paths.
- 8 "I believe that each of the three religions has its own temples and shows respect to their respective deities..... Buddhism has its Buddhist temples and shows reverence to Buddha.....Judaism has synagogues where respect is shown to God." (1489 stele).
- 9 For instance, Louis de Poirot argues in *The Book of Creation* (Chapter 14) that Melchizedek prefigures Jesus and that his sacrifice's bread and wine prefigure the Mass (Louis de Poirot 2014, p. 55).
- 10 Regarding the argumentation of Abraham as the father of believers, domestic scholars have examined Abraham's role in the Christian system as "the father of believers" from an existentialist standpoint (Wang, Z. Shixi Yabolahan zai Baoluo sixiang zhong de diwei—jianlun Luomashu 4:16 zhong ek de hanyi (Wang 2015)). Meanwhile, foreign scholars have presented a more extensive and nuanced case for Abraham, including explorations of his identity in Judaism and Christianity (Levenson 2011). Biblical scholars see Abraham's shift from being a pagan to becoming the father of the faith based on his ordinary life experiences (Swindoll 2014). Examining Abraham's creation of his own image from his textual writings can offer further insight (Grossman 2016).
- 11 The tablets in 1489 attribute the religion's founder to Abraham, while those from 1663 attribute it to Adam. Despite inaccurately describing Adam as the founder, which is largely based on the 1489 tablets, few scholars have addressed this issue in the 1663 tablets.
- 12 The primary manifestation of this "pioneering" is the establishment of a monotheistic belief system within a larger polytheistic framework, evident in inscriptions and an understanding of celestial pathways. The modern concept of religion is typically traced back to Moses rather than Abraham.
- 13 Pangu is regarded as the creator of heaven and earth in Chinese mythology.

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