

Jesuit accommodation in relation to biblical chronology and Chinese history

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The Jesuit missionaries developed a policy of accommodation in relation to Chinese religious and cultural practices in the 17th century. The Order further received permission in AD 1637 to use the Septuagint, instead of the Latin Vulgate, to try and harmonize the biblical chronology with Chinese history. Chinese history was believed to have extended back to nearly 3000 BC, and the historical accounts contain within them both creation and flood narratives that may loosely correlate with biblical history. How they correlate requires further research. Without getting into a discussion over whether the Masoretic Text or the Septuagint provide the better chronology, the Jesuit motivation for preferring the Septuagint was not entirely pure, being based upon an accommodation to non-Christian beliefs. The reception of Chinese history in the West, along with the discovery of indigenous people groups in the Americas, led increasingly secular academics to postulate that the biblical Flood may have been local, that not all humanity were related to Noah, or even related to Adam. The Jesuit policy of accommodation only encouraged the development of heterodox beliefs in Europe in the 17th century, including regarding biblical chronology.

The events of the Chinese Rites Controversy, which came to the fore in the 17th and 18th centuries, reveal that there was a desire among the Jesuit missionaries to accommodate non-Christian practices and beliefs with Christian sacred texts, and Catholic doctrine. The controversy arose because they found it difficult to make converts in China through an open approach, whereby Chinese converts were expected to fully replace Confucian rituals with Catholic rites. The Jesuits argued, in response to the problem, that many of the rituals were merely cultural and not religious (although in many animistic cultures honouring the dead descends into ancestor worship). A related controversy, which is the subject here, arose with regard to chronology. The China missionaries had gained permission from the Vatican in AD 1637 to use the longer chronology of the Greek Septuagint (LXX), instead of the Latin Vulgate that is based upon the Rabbinical Masoretic Text. The purpose was to try and harmonize Chinese history with the biblical accounts of creation and the Flood. While this move was within the bounds of orthodoxy, the motivation was not entirely based upon principle. While having apparent success in China, although perhaps only superficial, the policy weakened defences against biblical criticism and heterodox beliefs in the West in subsequent decades.¹

While examining the role of the Jesuits, we should recognize their determination and courage, despite highlighting the problems with accommodation. We may also note that they were not the only ones seeking to reconcile the Bible with ancient texts in ways that potentially undermined Scripture. For example, Robert Fludd, and some members of the Royal Society in England, were influenced by Kabbalism and Hermeticism. Other writings kept alive into the early modern period included various works of Greek philosophy,

Egyptian history, Hindu writings, and the Chaldean and Sibylline Oracles.¹

Chinese rites controversy

The Jesuits received permission from the Vatican in AD 1637 to use the Septuagint in support of their mission work in China, as opposed to the Latin Vulgate.^{2,3} This was for the purpose of overcoming an apparent anachronism between the Bible's chronology and Chinese history. The policy of accommodation with regards to Chinese tradition and history was first developed by Fr Matteo Ricci (figure 1). It was considered to be the most effective way of making progress for the Christian message.

The Chinese held to their culture, tradition, and history strongly, often with nationalistic fervour. The missionaries' aim was to first gain the acceptance of the *Literati*, the respected Confucian scholars, with the longer-term goal to establish Christianity in China. They did this by sharing Western science, dressing in Chinese clothing, and, in some instances, taking part in Confucian rites, which they regarded as cultural and not religious. However, the Confucians believed in venerating ancestors, which led to opposition from Dominicans and Franciscans to their policy of accommodation—hence the rise of the Chinese Rites controversy in the Catholic Church in the 17th and 18th centuries. The Catholic *Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith* agreed with the Dominican objections in a ruling of 1645, but agreed with the Jesuits upon appeal in 1656. The Vatican's position hardened in the early 18th century against accommodation. In a decree of 1704, and a Papal Bull of



Figure 1. Matteo Ricci and Paul Xu Guangqi, from *La Chine d'Athanase Kirchere de la Compagnie de Jesus: illustre de plusieurs monuments tant sacres que profanes*, Amsterdam, 1670. Plate facing p. 201. Ricci developed the policy of accommodation for the Chinese mission.

1715, Clement XI banned the rites, and insisted that Catholics use the word *Tianzhu* 天主 (Lord of Heaven) for God. This replaced the traditional Chinese terms *Tian* 天 (Heaven) and *Shangdi* 上帝 (Supreme Emperor). The hard line of the Catholic authorities made relations with the Chinese rulers more difficult and led to the expulsion of Catholics from China. However, the policy was reaffirmed by Benedict XIV in 1742, even forbidding further debate. A relaxation was granted on 8 December 1939.^{4,5}

Chinese and biblical chronology

In terms of unravelling chronology, the various approaches towards Chinese history were set out most clearly in several works in the 17th century. Jesuit priest Gabriel de Magalhães identified three opinions relating to the beginning of Chinese history in his major work *Nouvelle Relation de la Chine*, written between 1650–1668, and eventually published in 1688. Martino Martini's work *Sinicae historiae decas prima* was published earlier in Europe in 1658 (Martini had travelled

to Rome from China over a period of four years, from 1650 to 1654). Philippe Couplet's work was also available from 1686. Attempts at harmonizing the biblical accounts with Chinese history continued through the 18th century.⁶

A number of Chinese texts were used for their historical accounts. Texts available included those from the Song dynasty (AD 960–1279), two important pre-Song texts, and later writing from the late Ming dynasty (AD 1368–1644), and the early Qing dynasty (AD 1644–1911). The Jesuits further relied upon later commentaries, some of which elaborated upon the shorter earlier texts. The first pre-Song text available was that of Sima Qian's *Shiji* (*Records of the Historian*), the first part including the first five sovereigns, including that of the Yellow Emperor Huangdi 黄帝. Later editions from the Ming dynasty included a pre-text, the *Bu Shiji*, essentially a short commentary on three earlier emperors. The second pre-Song text, *Zhushu jinian* (*Bamboo Annals*), dates from the tomb of Prince Xiang of Wei (318–296 BC), being discovered in AD 284, and copied in the fifth and sixth centuries. Among Song dynasty text is the *Shaowei Tongjian jiyao* (*Summary of the Comprehensive Mirror by Shaowei*) of Jiang Zhi (AD 1111), which includes the early period from Fuxi 伏羲; and the *Huangwang daji* (*The Great Record of Emperors and Kings*) from AD 1141, which begins its account with the mythical Pangu 盘古 (for a more complete discussion of Chinese sources see Standaert (2012)).⁶ Pangu was considered a giant being asleep within an egg of chaos, with the pantheistic creation narrative taking place over periods of 18,000 years. The god-like being was considered the ancestor of the twin brother and sister, Fuxi and Nüwa 女媧.⁷

Magalhães outlined several approaches among Chinese scholars. Available were various speculative ancient mythologies, albeit not strongly supported by the Chinese scholars, which suggested Chinese history began tens or hundreds of thousands of years ago. Another opinion that was regarded as more historical related to accounts which began with the emperor Fuxi who was one of the five early sovereigns (figure 2a) and was believed to have reigned in Shensi province from 2952–2838 BC. The third view was that the first was Emperor Yao 堯 (figure 2b), who began his reign in 2357 BC. Yao was associated with a flood narrative. The Chinese history was then traced through 22 dynasties involving 236 kings over 4025 years (2357 BC to AD 1668, the time of Magalhães writing).⁸ However, Magalhães' work was not published until after it had been brought back to Europe by Couplet two decades later.

Martino Martini (1614–1661) considered that Chinese history started with Fuxi in 2952 BC, although his detailed chronology began with the Yellow Emperor Huangdi in 2697 BC. This history consisted of identifying 45 cycles of 60 years each (sexagenary cycles), ending with Emperor Ai of Han (6–1 BC) around the time of Christ's birth.⁹ Martini recognized that the flood in the time of Emperor Yao correlated broadly with the period of the biblical Flood (as

Images (a) and (b): CC BY 4.0



Figure 2. Painting of Emperor Fuxi (left), and Emperor Yao (right), by Kanō Sansetsu (1589–1651). Images dated to the Edo period, 9th year of Kan'ei (1632). Located in the Tokyo National Museum.

outlined in Ussher's chronology and the Vulgate), but along with the Jesuit missionaries he preferred the chronology of the Septuagint as a means of reconciling the accounts.^{5,10} He only tentatively suggested that Yao, or Jao, maybe connected to Janus, a Greek flood survivor, and in some sources linked to Noah.³

The Greek translation of Genesis infers that the creation occurred around 5554 BC, and the Flood around 3298 BC. The worldwide biblical Flood occurred around 2348 BC, from the derived chronology of the Vulgate (from Ussher), with creation around 4004 BC.¹¹ The Latin text would give insufficient time for the Chinese chronology, if Chinese history were to be fitted in the shorter timeframe, and for the Chinese to be descended from Noah. Martini placed the biblical Flood prior to 3000 BC, with Chinese history beginning at Fuxi shortly afterwards. Magalhães placed the biblical Flood at 3152 BC, that is 200 years prior to Fuxi, utilizing the limited flexibility that the Septuagint gave him. Martini could not find any cause of a flood in the Chinese writing, nor find evidence within the texts to ascertain whether the flood was local or universal, which he thought supported such a viewpoint.

Martini further questioned whether the Chinese flood accounts and the biblical ones were identical, and expressed, with some certainty, that East Asia had been inhabited from before the time of the biblical Flood "... *extremam Asiam ante diluvium habitatam fuisse procerto habeo*". The Chinese chronology was supported by Jesuit astronomer Sabatino de Ursis; while residing in Peking he concluded that Emperor Yao was reigning in 2358 BC. This was determined from observations of the position of various stars and calculated backwards to the location mentioned in the Shu Ching (*The Classic of History*).

Against Martini's equivocation, John Webb, a 17th-century English scholar, argued more strongly that Emperor Yao should be identified with Noah, as the dates correlated reasonably well. Webb believed that Noah had in fact built the Ark in China, making the case that Mount Ararat was somewhere towards the east, and then the Ark landed there as the waters receded. His main preoccupation was to argue that the Chinese language was the primitive one that Adam had spoken. Georg Horn, a German theologian from Leiden, traced backwards from Yao and identified Fuxi with Adam, in his attempt to correlate the other biblical patriarchs with the list of Chinese Emperors.^{3,12,13}

The Jesuit position was further outlined in 1686 by Philippe Couplet, with his work *Tabula chronologica monarchiae sinicae* (*Chronological Table of the Chinese Monarchy*) published in Paris in 1686; the purpose being to reinforce agreement between the Septuagint Chronology and the Chinese history. A year later he published some of the works of Confucius in Latin *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*.¹⁴ Couplet had spent 20 years in China, having been inspired by one of Martini's lectures to travel. An earlier work, dated to 24 December 1666, had been returned to Europe, but remained unpublished (*Prologomena ad Annales Sinicos, necnon Synopsim Chronologicam Monarchiae Sinicae*). While Martini had developed an uninterrupted chronology, Couplet left a gap in which the biblical Flood may fit. He thought that lack of the deluge account in Chinese history made interpretation difficult. Couplet's published work, in tabular form, began the Oriental chronology from Huangdi in 2697 BC, until the time of the Incarnation of Christ (the unpublished work began with Fuxi). The second work continued Chinese chronological account to the time of Couplet's writing.⁶

Impact upon Western thinking

As the attempt to harmonize Chinese history continued through the 18th century, the literal account of a global flood was undermined in Europe. Isaac Vossius, in his *Dissertatio de vera aetate mundi*, of 1659, argued that the biblical Flood was not universal, but only local, and that the Bible was only dealing with the events of the Middle East and not the whole of human society.^{8,12} This debate also encouraged consideration of belief in pre-Adamic races. The problem of the existence of ancient Gentile people groups, such as the Africans, Chinese and Native Americans, and scepticism that ancient people could cross the oceans, was one of the reasons that led Isaac La Peyrère to argue for the existence of pre-Adamic people. The work, *Prae-Adamitae*, was published in Latin in 1655 and in English in 1656, and it was subsequently discussed by members of the Royal Society.¹⁵ Giordano Bruno had intimated such a position in 1591.¹⁶

The desire to know more about Chinese history had reached as high as the French King Louis XIV, and Couplet had organized a questionnaire in Paris 1684, seeking further

information about the Chinese history and chronology. Jesuit missionaries continued to try and harmonize the Chinese history with the sacred texts through the 18th century. However, reflecting the spirit of the times, Voltaire, in 1756, simply claimed the Oriental ones were older in his *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*. This completely undermined the integrity of Scripture.⁶ While the policy of accommodation had been an attempt to further the Christian mission in China, the developing dialogue in Europe only played a part in undermining the revealed faith.

Summary

The Jesuit mission to China in the 17th century developed a policy that accommodated certain Chinese Confucian cultural aspects into their services. Furthermore, they received permission to use the Septuagint, with its longer inferred chronology, as opposed to the shorter period outlined in the Vulgate. While Christians may argue that this slightly longer chronology may fit within orthodox limits of biblical chronology, their motivation was not entirely based upon principle, but what was useful. It led to reliance upon the pagan Chinese chronology to inform Scripture, which is more problematic. The policy was discussed at length by Roman authorities and declared illegitimate for two centuries, from 1704 until 1939. While the policy may have had some success in gaining respect from the Chinese authorities in the short term, it is arguable that in the long term it was counterproductive.

In relation to this accommodation, the discovery of ancient cultures in East Asia and in the Americas led some academics to consider the possibility that not all people groups had experienced the Flood, or that some men and women may not be directly descended from Noah, or Adam and Eve. Western pride also led many scholars to think erroneously that Europeans were the first to cross continents. The campaign for accommodation in China may seem to have been only a small step, but it helped to open the door for heterodox beliefs to arise in Europe, including the development of belief in deep time. As discussed in a couple of other papers, during the 18th century Jesuit-trained academics conducted a similar process of accommodation in relation to Hindu practices and chronology. This is the Malabar rites controversy, which further contributed to the European development of belief in a more ancient history of the world.¹⁷

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