The Jesuits in China

This work shows Saint Francis Xavier about to embark on his missionary journey. The policies of the Jesuit Visitor encouraged the development of scholarly training with an approach to understanding Chinese traditions. This policy brought the Jesuits into closer contact with Chinese society, and they began to send their best missionaries to the region.

In 1582, the Jesuits moved beyond Macao and established missions in the Far East. The Jesuit foundations in the Far East were the most important of those belonging to the Society of Jesus in Asia. The Jesuits' approach to converting Chinese Christians was to respect the Chinese state. From the Jesuits' point of view, a good Christian would seek to be loyal to the state, and in the Confucian ceremonies required by the Chinese, the Jesuits' Christians were seen as faithful to their country.

The controversy concerned the use of “ancestor spirits” and “ancestor worship.” The Jesuits’ interpretation of the Confucian rites was that they were a way of honoring ancestors in a way that was compatible with Catholic beliefs. However, the Chinese state saw the rites in a different way, and there were concerns that the Jesuits were trying to undermine the state’s authority.

To address these concerns, the Jesuits decided to take a different approach. They began to develop a new method of transmitting the faith, which was based on the elements of Chinese culture that were deemed inoffensive to Catholic orthodoxy. This approach was known as the “Mandarin method.” It involved teaching the Chinese language to the Jesuits, so they could communicate with the Chinese people more effectively.

One of the most celebrated successes of the Mandarin method was the establishment of the annual Chinese calendar. The Jesuits at the imperial court of China set the stage for the suppression of the rites in 1704 and moved to make the calendar a symbol of their role in the imperial observatory.

The controversy was a debate over whether the Jesuits could accommodate to the Chinese culture. The Jesuits’ Christians were seen as a bridge between the Catholic Church and the Chinese people, and they were able to use this role to influence the Chinese society. However, the controversy also highlighted the tension between Catholic beliefs and Chinese cultural practices.

The Jesuits in China took as a major goal the geographical mapping of the Chinese Empire. The China-Jesuit Atlas was a corporate effort of the Jesuits, and it was completed in 1655. The atlas was a major contribution to European geography, and it was used to create maps of China and Japan. The atlas also included information about the local cultures and traditions of China and Japan.

The Jesuits in China also contributed to the study of the Chinese language. They were the first to translate Chinese texts into Latin, and they helped to establish the Latin alphabet in China. The Jesuits also established the first Western-style clocks in China, which were used to keep time and to signal the hours. The history of Western-style clockwork in China is connected to the Jesuits, and the Pope approved of the clocks in 1715.

The most celebrated period of Jesuit artistic activity in China took place under the Qing dynasty during the 18th century. The most celebrated Jesuit artist at the Qing court was Giovanni Castiglione, S.J. (1688–1768), a professional artist from Italy. From the few European paintings by Castiglione, it appears that the Jesuits were able to use their artistic skills to influence Chinese culture. Castiglione was able to make Chinese paintings that were both faithful to their religious content and appealing to Chinese audiences.