

How China shook Western thought

The writings of Jesuit missionaries had a profound impact on Enlightenment thinkers including Voltaire

By ZHAO XU

zhaoxu@chinadaily.com.cn

In 1658, Martino Martini, an Italian Jesuit missionary who had spent time in China, published in Munich one of his four influential books about the country. *Sinicae Historiae Decas Prima* tells the history of China starting from antiquity and ending at 1BC, a year that falls under the reign of Emperor Aidi of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 24).

Trying to incorporate Chinese history into the system and chronology of European history telling, Martini, who was preoccupied with converting people, failed to gauge the impact his works would have on intellectuals in the West.

"It contradicts or even undermines the Bible," said Zhang Xiping, a leading scholar on cultural exchanges between China and the West.

"While identifying Fuxi as the first emperor in primordial China, Martini also noted that the coming to power of Fuxi took place 600 years before Noah's Ark was spared by God in the world-engulfing flood, as depicted in the Old Testament.

"And it became apparent that the birth of Jesus, which most scholars today believe to have been around the beginning of the first century, echoes China's Western Han Dynasty, an era marked by rapid social development and flourishing culture."

Voltaire, the French writer and philosopher who played a central role in defining the 18th-century Enlightenment, is believed to have been deeply impressed — and shocked — by the book. "What about if what Martini wrote is true?" Voltaire is believed to have said. "Then what should I do with the Bible?"

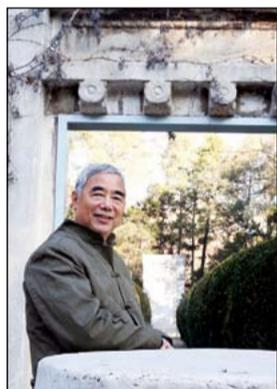
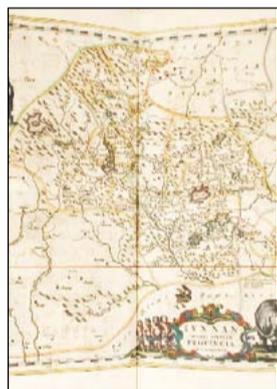
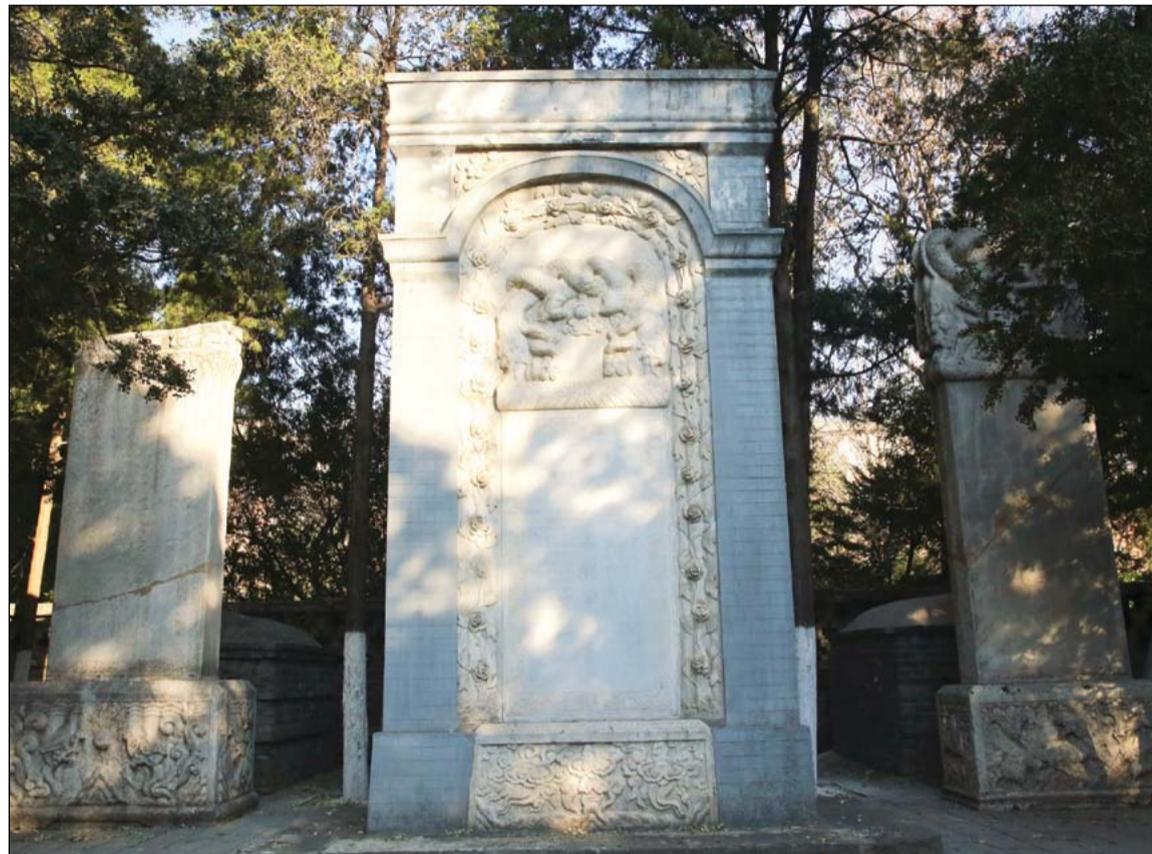
That question has no doubt taken Voltaire and those who came after him forever to answer.

Zhang said that many of the Jesuit missionaries who came to China between the 16th and 18th centuries later became what we would today call China hands, responsible for introducing — or in a sense reintroducing — the ancient country of the Orient to their contemporaries in the West.

But before that, most of them had to reconcile what they had had in mind with what was laid out in front of their own eyes.

"Until before the Second Opium War (1856-60), in which China suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of Anglo-French troops, the country accounted for one third of the world's total GDP," Zhang said.

"When the first batch of Jesuit missionaries arrived in the late 16th century, China was affluent and prosperous, mature with its own



Clockwise from top: The gravestones for Western missionaries on the campus of the Beijing Administration Institute, and the one in the middle is that of Matteo Ricci; Chinese philosopher Confucius and his words introduced to Europe by the Western missionaries; Zhang Xiping, a scholar on cultural exchanges between China and the West; A map of China painted by Martino Martini around 1655; Li Xiumei, an associate law professor in Beijing.

PHOTOS BY JIANG DONG AND PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

guiding traditions and underlying philosophy.

"The West, for its part, was still in the throes of the Renaissance and Reformation, cultural, political and religious movements that would ultimately usher in the modern age. Scientifically, China may have started to lag behind; but culturally and economically it clearly showed its edge."

Some missionaries must have had their own moments of doubt, Zhang said.

"They socialized with members of Chinese high society, who dressed in luxurious fabrics and traveled in beautifully decorated sedans. It was a totally different experience from the one Western explorers had in other parts of the world, the Americas for example. And for them it always came back to the question: 'How is it that a place totally untouched by the

message of God is blessed with such wealth and prosperity?' Such experience, humbling in many aspects, must have contributed to the flexibility they later demonstrated in their missionary work."

Matteo Ricci, believed to be the first Jesuit missionary to have set foot in Beijing, the Chinese capital for the previous 300 years, allowed his Chinese converts to continue their tradition of ancestral worship. As Christians, they could still kneel down to their parents, their emperors and of course their ancestors.

"Ricci and his like-minded fellow Jesuits tried to convince the Vatican that such tolerance was in line with Church tenets, since the kneeling and worship fell into the realm of tradition as opposed to religion," Zhang said.

However, there were some matters

on which the missionaries were resolute, polygamy being one of them. While it was hard for some converts to forsake all their concubines, it must be noted that the Catholic Church is not at all unfamiliar with licentious popes who fathered illegitimate children.

In those days, when the perilous voyages between Europe and China often claimed a life or two, most Jesuit missionaries chose to send back what they saw and heard in writing. Many of them also translated, introducing Confucius classics — *The Analects of Confucius*, or *The Words of Confucius*, for example — to intellectuals in the West.

The publication in Europe of both scholarly and popular literature about China by these missionaries achieved effects both intended and unintended, Zhang said.

"They were prompted to write about China mainly by their own need to ensure continued support for the mission from the Church's central authorities, by creating favorable publicity for their activities. This was of utter importance, bearing in mind the controversies and debates the Jesuits' accommodating ways had aroused among their more conservative detractors, who eventually brought the case to the Vatican."

"How persuasive did such publications turn out to be? It's hard to say. But they did open a window for those who were searching for answers to rejuvenate their own society, to liberate it and themselves."

Confucius China as appears in the writings of the missionaries had a profound impact on Enlightenment thinkers including Voltaire, who tapped into Chinese philosophy as one of the main sources for the ideological fermentation of the movement, Zhang said.

In fact, decades before that, the aptly dubbed China fever had proven infectious enough to take over the European courts. Zhang, who has traveled widely in Europe, talks of coming across vestiges of this fever in the form of "the Chinese pagodas."

"They are everywhere — in France, Germany and Austria. It must have been considered very chic to have such a pagoda installed in the carefully designed royal gardens of the European monarchs. Trade, which took silk and porcelain to Europe, certainly provided plenty of images to fuel the imagination, but the writings of the Jesuit missionaries helped to feed the minds that wished to think deeper."

Louis XIV (1638-1715), the Sun King of France whose love of extravagance sometimes belied him as a man of depth, may have known better. The strongman, who embraced Chinoiserie — China style with a Western twist — in the designs of the Chateau of Versailles, sent some of his empire's most talented men to China, to the court of his contemporary, the great Qing emperor Kangxi.

"Joachim Bouvet and Jean-Francois Gerbillon are regarded as among the top mathematicians of 17th and 18th century France, and Louis sent them to China," said Li Xiumei, a law professor in Beijing who has made the study of the Jesuit mission in China her hobby for the past decade.

"Historians criticize him because of that. One can't help feeling that the French ruler, who gave audience to missionaries who returned from China and read about the country, must have got himself involved into a kind of rivalry with an emperor he never expected to meet."

"He wanted to impress him at any cost."