

PREFACE

“Sages appear in the Eastern Seas; they have the same mind, the same principle. Sages appear in the Western Seas; they have the same mind, the same principle” Lu Jiuyuan wrote in 1151. Some four hundred and fifty years later the sages from the West crossed the seas and met the sages of the East in China. This early contact between the Jesuit missionaries and Chinese scholars became one of the most dynamic encounters between Western and Eastern Culture. The question as to whether or not the sages of both cultures actually had the same mind and the same principle was a central theme in their philosophical discussions; it was also the main question which preoccupied Yang Tingyun.

Yang Tingyun 楊廷筠 (1562–1627) was an average scholar-official: he studied the Confucian Classics for many years, successfully completed the palace examination, and passed through an official career, first as a district magistrate and then as a censor. He was interested in Neo-Confucian philosophy and also in Buddhism. However, at a certain moment in his life, he came into contact with the Western missionaries and was so attracted by their teachings that he asked to be baptized as a Christian. He became an ardent convert, took the Jesuit fathers under his protection during the periods of persecutions, and wrote several treatises on Christian thought. Why did he embrace Christianity? How did a person with such a classical Chinese education and intellectual background as Yang Tingyun – he became Christian when he was already fifty years old – interpret Western-Christian thought? These questions formed the starting-point for the present study. But Yang Tingyun’s thought cannot be separated from the context of his life and time. Questions to be answered in this regard are: To what extent did Yang Tingyun fit into the official-career patterns of his time? To what extent was he involved in the political, social, intellectual, and religious movements of his time? How did he behave as a scholar and as a Neo-Confucian?

This study of Yang Tingyun’s life and thought can, therefore, be situated in the borderland between the study of Late Ming China and the study of Christianity in China. This dissertation does not endeavour to give an overall description of the Late Ming intellectual life or the Christian movement at that time. Many excellent studies on both subjects have appeared in recent years. By investigating Yang Tingyun’s life and thought from two different perspectives – Western and Chinese – this study only hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the Late Ming time and to gain a better insight into the spread of Christianity in China. If it appears to contain some points of interest for a better knowledge of the dialogue between these two cultures, it would be a source of great satisfaction.

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