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The 1949 catalogue of the Library of Beitang in Beijing published by its last librarian, the Lazarist Hubert Verhaeren, lists c. 4,100 titles (5,133 volumes) of pre-1800 Western books, of which ca. 59% were in Latin, 17% in French, 10% in Italian, 5% in Portuguese, and the rest in Spanish, German, Greek, Dutch, Polish, and English. This is one of the chief sources for Golvers’ study, but hardly the only one. Libraries of Western Learning is an ambitious, erudite, and deeply researched work that presents nearly all extant evidence in its attempt to reconstruct the ‘Jesuit book culture’ of the old China Mission. In this first volume, Golvers deals with the logistics of book acquisition: the request for books from Jesuit missionaries in China, the response in Europe and the organization of the book search, and the final transmission and shipment to China. In a second planned volume, he proposes to study the development of Jesuit libraries in China, to offer a content analysis of the western books as a study in the history of reading, and finally, to understand the reading practices and transmission to a Chinese public.

Now incorporated into the National Library in Beijing, the corpus of western books in the former Beitang Library is not entirely open to the public, thus rendering impossible for the present any systematic on site research into paratextual material. Moreover, the Beitang collection had a highly heterogeneous and layered history: the core layer consists of western books from the three Jesuit churches in Beijing prior to the Society’s suppression in 1773; a second layer represents books from Jesuit residences in the Chinese provinces that were moved to the imperial capital after the Qing prohibition of evangelization in the early eighteenth century; and still other books with a pre-1800 imprint might have been acquired only in the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, many titles had been lost and the Verhaeren catalogue by no means represents a comprehensive list
of western-language books that were in circulation in the old Jesuit mission. During long years of archival research (2004 to 2011) in Portugal, Belgium, Italy, France, and Germany, Golvers has compiled a list of 1,400 titles written by 900 authors mentioned by Jesuit China missionaries, either as desiderata to be obtained or as works they had read. About 60% of these are not mentioned in Verhaeren. Nonetheless, data on prior ownership, donation, and provenance in Verhaeren provide important supplementary information to the large amount of sources painstakingly collected by Golvers in his long years of research.

After an introduction, the text is divided into two long chapters and one short one, followed by an extensive list of the sources consulted. In Chapter I, 'The Requests for Books', Golvers discusses in detail all the archival evidence concerning wish lists and lists of suggestions. From the wish list of the German Jesuit Christian Herdtrich written in Guangzhou in 1670 for the purpose of replacing his library confiscated in the Yang Guangxian persecution (the Calendar Case), Golvers goes on in turn to analyze relevant passages in letters written by Filippucci (1679), Intorcetta (1671), Thomas (1683/1703), Fontaney (1687), Contancin (1730), Gaubil/Parrenin (1731), and others. Golvers identifies three purposes of these book requests: the need to keep up with the latest scholarship in Europe, especially in astronomy, mathematics, and medicine; for psychological comfort, as the requested titles may have a deep personal resonance for the China missionaries; and for strategic purposes, in order to keep current with and be able to refute the rising polemic against the Jesuit China Mission that came to be called the Rites Controversy. In this chapter Golvers also discusses briefly the budgetary, doctrinal, and strategic considerations.

Chapter II is devoted to analyzing the response in Europe and the organization of book searches. To a considerable extent, Golvers succeeds in reconstructing the European network of addresses and contact persons, the agents of the requests. Many of these agents were understandably Jesuits themselves, though other clerics and laity—relatives, high-placed patrons, publishers and book-sellers—were also involved. Institutionally, the office of the procurator was of singular importance in handling book requests. This meant both the procurator for the Portuguese padroado based in Lisbon as well as the procurator for the French Jesuit Mission in Paris. In addition to these two European Jesuit agents, visiting procurators from the China Vice-Province also went on book-buying trips, in addition to recruiting fresh missionaries and soliciting donations. The travels of Nicolas Trigault and Philippe Couplet, two of the most effective procurators for the China Vice-Province, are singled out for analysis. Indeed, the work of these two Belgian Jesuits exemplified the importance of the Low Countries in this global book network, which dominated
Eurasian exchange between the early seventeenth century and 1728, when the Ostende Company terminated its Guangzhou route. Not only was Antwerp, with the Plantin Press, one of Europe’s most important publishing centers, Belgian Jesuits could easily access the Amsterdam book market, where many titles listed under the Index of Prohibited Books could be purchased. Finally, Antwerp was linked to Germany and particularly to Cologne, the center of Catholic publishing in the Holy Roman Empire, and to the Book Fair in Frankfurt. A third group of book agents were Jesuit candidates for overseas missions, the Indipetae: all transported books with them; some, frustrated in the denial of their vocations, donated books to the China Mission. Donations, in fact, were a major source of the books, given the limited budget of the Jesuit China Mission. There are detailed discussions of this aspect in the chapter as well as information on prices, circulation, and collection.

Chapter III, the final chapter, is shorter. It discusses the material aspects of the book shipping, the routes involved, postage, clearance, and the assignment of books. In this transcontinental network, Goa, Macau (where the Portuguese procurator was stationed), and Guangzhou (site of the French Jesuit procurator) served as the nodes.

Libraries of Western Learning is a solid mine of information that is served by an Index Nominum for persons, places, and book titles. The detailed analytical Table of Contents also provides a good guide to its use. Readers will find most useful the many and long quotations from archival sources. All in all, this is a work of central importance in the field of Sino-western relations. In looking forward to the second part of this project, one could only hope that the author will be granted permission to consult the actual books in Beijing in extenso. For a history of reception and reading, which will be the central theme of volume 2, will require extensive research into the paratextual evidence that only the books themselves, whose stories of travel and adventure Golvers has so expertly narrated in this volume, will be able to tell.