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Antonella Romano’s *Impressions de Chine: L’Europe et l’englobement du monde* (Impressions of China: Europe and the Globalization of the World) is an extremely erudite and somewhat revisionist account of the Catholic mission to China in its global context, from about 1550 to 1680.1 Despite what the title may suggest, the book aims less to recover the impressions that Europeans formed about China, than to recover the conditions under which they formed them. Its approach, drawn largely from the history of science, privileges networks and nodes as well as sites and scales of exchange over the intellectual or cultural history of European orientalism. The result is a story of the mission to China that puts new emphasis on the role of non-Jesuit missionaries and Iberian imperial powers, and from this changed perspective re-contextualizes several of the canonical events in the history of Sino-Western exchange.

The early modern Jesuit mission to China had a fairly clear beginning and ending: from the arrival of Matteo Ricci on the Chinese mainland in 1582, to the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773. It can be further subdivided into two phases, each lasting about a century, which were in many ways quite different. In the first phase, missionaries of many orders, including Franciscans, Augustinians, and Dominicans, were active in China, and they were rather more influential there than they were in Europe. In the second phase, the China mission became strongly associated with the Jesuits, and their work became important for European culture even as it was increasingly sidelined in China. Romano rightly points out that there are real continuities between these two phases—for example, influential books written in the sixteenth century were often cited throughout the eighteenth. But this book is about the first phase: “the period when the entity China appeared on the European radar” (8).

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1 There are two ambiguous words in the original French title: *impression* means both ‘impression’ and ‘printing,’ and *englobement* suggests both ‘encompassing’ and ‘making round’.
*Impressions de Chine* is well organized into eight chronological chapters, which might be grouped into three parts. The first part, chapters 1-3, explores the global context within which the mission to China was established. The sixteenth century was the era of the sweeping imperial visions of both the Habsburg monarchy and the Tridentine Church. The mission to China began during the 1550s—an “Asian moment of Catholic universality,” with Portuguese Jesuits already in Japan and Spanish Dominicans in the New World—and for the next century, Rome would be its intellectual center (89). The second part, chapters 4-6, picks up in the 1580s with the first serious efforts of the Society of Jesus in China and continues through the Ming-Qing transition of the 1640s. It offers detailed readings of the works of the most famous Jesuits—the “triad” of Matteo Ricci, Johann Adam Schall von Bell, and Ferdinand Verbiest—analyzing the “topos of globality” by means of particular attention to their contributions to geography (225). The last section, chapters 7 and 8 plus the conclusion, focuses on competing interpretations of the Manchu conquest of the 1640s: one by the Jesuit Martino Martini, who participated in the events, and the other by the bishop Juan de Palafox y Mendoza, who learned about them while living in Mexico. The book concludes in 1688, after a century during which “China gradually took its place on the revised atlas of European knowledge,” and with a new approach during the age of the Lumières about to begin (305).

The introduction does not explicitly set out the argument of the book, but instead situates it historiographically. Here we may note that *Impressions de Chine* appears in Fayard’s series, *L’épreuve de l’histoire*, featuring other important titles on the cultural, intellectual, and political history of Europe in global context. We might also mention that Romano is known for her authoritative work on science in the Counter-Reformation, including studies of Jesuit mathematicians and Renaissance Rome, and that she now holds a chair at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in “science, knowledge, and religions. Catholic Europe and the modern world.” This all suggests the research questions that truly animate the book. Romano rightly points out that studies of the Sino-Western encounter have mostly developed “in the margins of research on China and its history,” despite the “issue of asymmetry”—that the influence of China on Europe was much greater than the other way around (13-14). This book is therefore situated instead among the burgeoning fields of global history and the history of knowledge, both in their distinctively European flavor.

In a way, it thus represents a welcome return to an earlier approach, which tried to make sense of the encounter with China in the context of European culture more generally. Focused more on the missionaries in China than on their interlocutors in Europe, its closest progenitors are
works by historians like John Witek and David Mungello rather than those by Virgile Pinot and René Étiemble. But it significantly revises their story by incorporating an enormous new historiography that has emerged since the 1990s on the Jesuit mission, much of it from just down the corridors of the EHESS where the author is based. Historians of science such as Florence Hsia and Catherine Jami have highlighted the schisms, conflicts, disunities, and disjunctions between the missionaries, in part by analyzing them in their different roles as cultural mediators, men of science, and agents of empire. Meanwhile, other historians such as Isabelle Landry-Deron and Wu Huiyi have painted a much richer picture of the Chinese sources and contexts that informed the missionaries’ endeavors. Romano is to be commended for having mastered such a hyper-specialized historical terrain, and drawn from it to produce a broad but detailed overview of the first hundred years of the mission to China, perhaps the first in decades.

While Impressions de Chine is to some extent a synthesis, it is deeply grounded in close readings of both published missionary works and archival documents gathered from all over Western Europe. The aim is not total comprehensiveness, but rather diverse representation, especially as the sources relate to the main themes of European imperial expansion and early modern global thought. This interest leads organically to two basic points that modify the big-picture story as other historians would probably tell it. First, the Jesuits were not the only missionaries who were active in China, and expanding to consider their competitors and at times adversaries, including Dominicans, Franciscans, and Augustinians, casts the Jesuits’ own work in a different light. Second, the national origins of the most famous missionaries and the major role that China later played in the French Enlightenment have obscured the role of the Iberian powers in the early part of the missionary endeavor. These points are notionally methodological, but they also lead to many independent fresh historical observations.

Take, first, the role of the Spanish and Portuguese empires. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they were not only the overlords of the Atlantic, but also active in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It was only later, when the balance of power in Catholic Europe shifted from Habsburg to Bourbon, that the center of sinology shifted along with it, from Rome to Paris. For the first hundred years, “The two Indies” were often understood together, and early letters on China were published alongside those on Brazil and the Philippines. Missionary endeavors were a part of a broader

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3 Hsia (2009), Jami (2012).
power struggle between the Spanish and Portuguese crowns. In 1580, their unification altered the equation, and activities were no longer bounded by the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494. Then, in 1640, the Iberian powers were again separated, and the events were no less consequential. For missionaries in China during the fall of the Ming, the parallel collapse of two universal monarchies on opposite ends of Eurasia invited speculation on global history.

The attention to Spanish and Portuguese actors further underscores the often-overlooked role played by members of non-Jesuit missionary orders. By extending beyond the learned Jesuit accounts, Romano reveals a different approach that was more political than historical, more journalistic than theoretical. The first significant European work on China to appear after Marco Polo was published in 1569, not by the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci, but rather by the Spanish Dominican Gaspar da Cruz. Ricci’s was not even the second; in 1586, an Augustinian missionary, Juan González de Mendoza, put out a lastingly influential compilation after having traveled to Asia under the auspices of Philip II on a diplomatic mission. One of the most interesting observations in the book is that in its early origins during this period, the mission to China was actually positioned against the Society of Jesus, which was then enjoying the pinnacle of its success in Japan (84).

Jumping forward to the end of the book, a well-known history of the Manchu conquest written by another Italian Jesuit, Martino Martini, looks different when compared to the rival account by another Spanish priest, Juan de Palafox, who learned about it while in New Spain, via the Philippines, from Dominican and Franciscan informants in Fujian. Romano suggests that adding new sources not only expands our understanding of the Catholic missions in general, but also revises our view of the Jesuit mission in particular.

The middle section of the book, which focuses on the more famous canonical Jesuit figures, accomplishes this through a slightly different approach. Here, the methodology comes from the history of science, and the connecting theme is geographical knowledge. One of the book’s main arguments is that “the emergence of China is contemporaneous with the conception of the earth as a globe, a globalization understood as a heterogeneous, conflictual, and discontinuous process” (16). The book is attentive to the geographical developments going on outside China and, to a more limited extent, with indigenous Chinese cartographical projects as well. Each Jesuit missionary is then discussed as contributing to this process, non-teleological as it may have been. Ricci introduced the world map of Abraham Ortelius to Chinese elites, but his effect on indigenous cartographical practices was marginal. His successor, Nicolas Trigault, approached cartographical exchange from the opposite direction, centering a Chinese map on his book’s frontispiece in an appeal to the elites of
Europe. For Martini, whose works included both an atlas and a history of China, the central question was about the population and inhabitation of the postdiluvial world, which proved fertile territory for global theorizing.

Through its focus on geography, the book contributes to an expanding literature on the history of global thought: “globality,” Romano maintains, “has a history” (18). The introduction invokes the historian of Latin America Serge Gruzinski on the “first globalization,” and the historian of South Asia Sanjay Subrahmanyam on the “global history of the first modernity,” which are both revisited throughout the book to reflect on classic problems of European intellectual history (19). One recurring theme is the historical distinction between savages and barbarians: categorizing the Manchus in particular was a recurring problem (254-257). Another is the supposed divide between religion and science: either one could alternately serve as the counterpart to superstition, depending mostly on an author’s purpose (156-157). Exploring many such issues of broad interest to historians of the early modern period, the book ends fittingly in the 1680s with the beginning of what Paul Hazard dubbed “the crisis of the European mind.” The role that China would play in that story is mostly beyond the purview of this book, but Romano does an excellent job of showing how China set the stage for it.

In sum, Impressions de Chine is a contribution to the history of the Catholic mission to China that will also be cited by global historians and Iberian historians, as well as by historians of religion, science, and empire. Those who, like myself, are not native readers of French might find its scholarly style somewhat challenging, but all who persist will surely learn a great deal from Impressions de Chine.

References


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6 Hazard (1935).
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