
Western Medical Diplomacy in Imperial China

Justin Doan
Emory University

Today, the official population of Christians in China amounts to around 44 million worshippers, comprising a significant portion of the Chinese people.¹ The history and origin of this diverse group of Christians extend from the rise of Catholic influence in Europe to the proliferation of Christianity into a stable foothold. There were extensive Jesuit and Protestant missions to Qing China. During the latter period, the most meaningful interactions between Imperial China and the European world took place, culminating in China being primarily opened to the influence of the West by the turn of the 20th century. In these interactions, except for the Macartney embassy to the Qianlong Emperor, Christian missionaries took leading roles in spreading their faith and negotiating favorable diplomatic conditions and goodwill between China and the West. In their role, these missionary diplomats sought to garner the favor of their Chinese hosts by utilizing the most compelling means available to them at the time, which was their scientific expertise, particularly in the medical sciences. Growing Western influence in China increased missionary activity and medical missions during this period. Therefore, it is worth analyzing the interconnected forces of medical science and Western diplomacy by Christian missionaries in China and Western medicine's

¹ "Protestant Christianity Is Booming in China." *The Economist*. *The Economist Newspaper*. Accessed April 23, 2021. <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/09/15/protestant-christianity-is-booming-in-china>.

effects on China. In the history of Imperial China, there are two examples of treatment being used by Western missionaries; these include the Jesuit missions to the early Qing courts and the later Protestant Christian medical missions to Qing China. These instances illustrate the usage of medicine by missionaries to advance Western and Christian influence in China, and both, in turn, arose from the respective broader growth in Western influence then.

Before the Jesuit and Protestant missions, there was little contact between China and the Christian West due to the large geographic expanse between the two. However, as the Mongol Empire swept across large swathes of Asia and established itself as the ruler of China, it appeared that contact was unavoidable as the West was now on the verge of invasion. There was sufficient impetus for the West to dispatch missions to ascertain this potential threat to Christendom.² One such mission was led by William of Rubruck, sent by Louis IX to the court of Möngke Khan in 1253 to convert the Mongols to Christianity.³ However, like the ones previously sent, this mission was unsuccessful, except for providing a detailed ethnography of the Mongols. Additionally, an exciting result of this mission was that it involved one of the earliest theological and philosophical debates between the religious advocates of Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity at the behest of Möngke Khan.⁴ Another notable event was early medical diplomacy: when Rubruck gave Rhubarb herb as medicine to

² Dawson, Christopher. *The Mongol Mission: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1955. p. 38-43.

³ Dawson, Christopher. *The Mongol Mission: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1955. p. 89

⁴ Dawson, Christopher. *The Mongol Mission: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1955. p. 188-194

improve the ailing condition of the second wife of Möngke Khan.⁵ Overall, Rubruck's mission did not successfully proselytize or convert the Mongol leadership to Christianity, but he produced a famously detailed account of the Mongol Empire.

However, both of these examples reveal the reason for the broad failures of the Christian missions to the Mongol empire during this period. Although Rubruck's and the other Christian missions were well-received by the Mongol court, they were not able to gain much influence nor favor and were thus treated as simple envoys to the Khan., Their Christian religion was seen as equal to the others within the Mongol Empire, forcing Rubruck to defend his faith in a religious debate. This failure was that Rubruck's mission did not particularly appeal to the Khan. In contrast, the later missions of Jesuits and Protestants utilized advanced sciences and medical knowledge as a central characteristic and allure of their religion. Even though Rubruck ameliorated the ailing condition of the Khan's wife, the state of Christian medicine then was at parity or even lacking with that of the Mongols as the West had not yet developed science. Therefore, Möngke Khan, unimpressed, did not grant privileges and preferences to Christian missionaries such as Rubruck, who sought to expand the influence of the Catholic Church and the West in China. This state-of-affairs, wherein the permitted Christian missionaries were able to travel to and exert modest influence in China under the patronage of the Mongols, alongside Western merchants such as the famous Marco Polo, continued until the fall of the Mongol Yuan dynasty. After, Western influence and Christian missions primarily declined due to the loss of Mongol protection, the Black Death preoccupying European interests, and xenophobic policies of the nascent Ming dynasty.⁶

⁵ Ruysbroeck, Willem van, Peter A. Jackson, and David Morgan. *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke, 1253-1255*. Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010. p. 197

⁶ Bays, Daniel H. *A New History of Christianity in China*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. p.14-15

This shortage of Western influence and the presence of Christian missionaries during much of the Ming dynasty was ended by the inception of Western maritime exploration and imperialism into the Asiatic region. During this time, the Portuguese seaborne expansion brought the Jesuit missionaries, who were inherently endowed with abundant knowledge in the sciences proliferating through Europe, including physics, reasoning, mathematics, and medicine.⁷ The academic qualities of the Jesuits uniquely positioned them to spread their knowledge to China and, more importantly, to use this advantage to gain influence and proselytize in China. When these Jesuits gradually gained favor in China by spreading their knowledge in trading cities, the Kangxi Emperor came to power.⁸ According to Daniel Bays, the Kangxi Emperor became a significant sponsor of Jesuit science propagation during this time. He even allowed some Jesuits to serve as advisors in his court, sanctioning their mission of proselytization in China with his 1692 proclamation. The Jesuits took advantage of this opportunity by focusing on “evangelization from the top down...[and] indirect evangelism by means of science and technology to convince the elite of the high level of European civilization.” In accommodating their practices to traditional Chinese ones, they achieved greater assimilation and proselytization.⁹ According to Benjamin A. Elman, during the period of transition from the Ming to the Qing, the Jesuits were able to entrench themselves with and gain the favor of the Qing leadership, even displacing the native Chinese literati.¹⁰ The Jesuits were able to exert significant

⁷ Spence, Jonathan Dermot. *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1985. p. 134

⁸ Estes, Charles S. “Christian Missions in China.” PhD diss. Johns Hopkins University, 1895. p. 18

⁹ Bays, Daniel H. *A New History of Christianity in China*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. p. 21-23

¹⁰ Elman, Benjamin A. *A Cultural History of Modern Science in China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. p. 15

influence in the Qing court under Kangxi until the Qing court perceived the Jesuits as a threat to their power during a controversial period of disagreement about papal influence in China and significantly reduced their impact.¹¹

Despite the Jesuits losing their favor in the Qing court, it is still worth exploring the extent of their influence in the affairs of Qing governance and how their medical knowledge helped expand this influence. As noted by both Bays and Elman, the Qing leadership held the Jesuits highly in their court, especially the French Jesuits, who gained significant power and prominence in the court, with roles such as participating in negotiations between the Manchu and Russian Empires and teaching the Kangxi Emperor about Western learning.¹² Moreover, there was a notable instance of the French Jesuit, Bouvet, treating the Kangxi Emperor's bout of malaria with Jesuit medicine. Following this, Kangxi invited Bouvet to bring more Jesuits to China to serve him—an actual example of medicine being used by the Jesuits to gain influence in the Qing Court.¹² However, in *A Cultural History of Modern Science in China*, Elman argued that “astronomy became the focal point for the contending groups to shape their political influence. It was in mathematical astronomy, not medicine, that the early Jesuits in China would leave their mark. . . .”¹² Indeed, as Elman went on to elucidate in his book, the teachings of astronomy garnered much political influence in the Qing court for the Jesuits since astronomy was essential to the political legitimacy of the Emperor as the “son of heaven,” and therefore interested the Chinese the most.¹³ Additionally, as the medical historian Louis Fu describes, “Because [the Jesuits] gained a foothold in the capital through their astronomical and mathematical works, they paid less attention to medical matters.”¹⁴

¹¹ Elman, Benjamin A. *A Cultural History of Modern Science in China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. p.34-35

¹² Elman, Benjamin A. *A Cultural History of Modern Science in China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. p. 16-17

While astronomy was indeed one of the primary appeals of the Jesuits to the Qing court, it was through medicine that the Jesuits were able to not only gain close access to the Kangxi Emperor, treating him many times but were also permitted to open religious hospitals at port cities and interact with the literati and nobility of the time. Moreover, as a reward for their contributions to the Qing court, the Jesuits were gifted with “gold ingots and a large dwelling in the palace and a church named Our Saviour’s Church was erected....”.¹⁴ Considering this, it is unmistakable that the Jesuits’ medical knowledge was used to gain influence in the Qing court and areas where Westerners would spread during later imperialism. Ironically, while the Jesuits sought to use science and medicine to influence the Qing and increase their leverage, the Kangxi Emperor and his court sought to use the Jesuits’ medical expertise as their political tools.

According to the medical historian Beatriz Puente-Ballesteros, the Kangxi Emperor controlled and exerted a monopoly over the allocation of Jesuit medicine and physicians in his court and was personally involved in the delegation of Jesuit medical care to those within his close circle. He also used Jesuit medicine as a means of solidifying his political stature, as “for the Kangxi Emperor, the patronage of Jesuit medical practice was an instrument of which he made use in his imperial network...a network with a clear Manchu identity consisting of imperial relatives, ministers, high-ranking officials and officers from the Central Government and the Territorial Administration, but mostly from the Manchu Banner troops, [and]...the personal circle surrounding the Emperor, and thus shared some degree of intimacy with him.”¹³ The Kangxi Emperor consolidated his control over the Qing court by providing Jesuit medicine to critical Manchu leadership in his court to endear loyalty

¹³ Puente-Ballesteros, Beatriz. “Jesuit Medicine in the Kangxi Court (1662-1722): Imperial Networks and Patronage.” *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* 34, no. 1 (2011): 86–162. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26669323-03401005>. p. 90,118,139,147-148

and create a “network of gratitude and indebtedness” to him, which secured his position against subversion.

Additionally, since the medical matters of his officials were considered a state secret, the use of Jesuits was essential for keeping this information within the court and strengthening the Emperor’s stature as the Kangxi Emperor tightly controlled the Jesuits’ activities to remain within his purview. Thus the Jesuits could not divulge court secrets. Meanwhile, through the Kangxi Emperor’s support for Jesuit medicine within his court, the Jesuits were privy to the Emperor’s inner circle and held great respect and influence within his court. This political arrangement continued until Jesuit influence in the court waned. Then, the presence of the Jesuits in China gradually dissipated because of political controversies between the Qing leadership and the Pope and the dissolution of the Jesuit order by the Pope in 1773.¹⁴

After this period, the presence of Western missionaries in China significantly declined, that is until increased imperialist activities by Western powers, mainly the British, again brought missionaries to China’s shores, such as the arrival of the first Protestant missionary, Robert Morrison, to Guangzhou in 1807.¹⁵ During this time, the medical missionaries and the diplomacy of the Western imperialist powers became more entwined than in the past. However, in terms of proselytization, the newly arrived Protestants focused their activities on spreading science and medicine to win over the common Chinese and gain influence since the Qing leadership was not open to missionary work as they had been in the past. According to Benjamin Elman, “British Protestants...perceived the Qing Empire as an obstacle to open commerce and Christian evangelism [and] articulated through religion and science their goal of opening China

¹⁴ Bays, Daniel H. *A New History of Christianity in China*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. p.31

¹⁵ Bays, Daniel H. *A New History of Christianity in China*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. p.43

though diplomacy to the international community and enlightening its peoples.” With this same impetus, the Protestants forced the British Parliament to dissolve the British East India Company’s trade monopoly in China, permitting missionaries to enter through the treaty port cities.¹⁶

These Western imperialist assertions came from treaties, such as the Treaty of Wangxia and the Treaty of Nanking, resulting from the Opium Wars, allowing Westerners to establish control over treaty ports at key cities along the Chinese coast. As a result, Protestant missionaries were “allowed the building of hospitals in these urban concessions.”¹⁹ During this time, according to the medical historian Neville Yeomans, Western medicine was shaping up to its modern form, with its significant advantage over Chinese medicine being “surgical competency, based on anatomic knowledge and an awareness of the importance of asepsis.”¹⁷ These advancements in Western medicine proved crucial for swaying the Qing Empire.

As explained by Xu Guangqiu, a historian of China’s relations with the West, the policies of the Canton system and the broader Qing government were hostile to outside religions and proselytization for much of this period.¹⁸ As such, the Protestant missionaries felt that the appeal of medicine and Western modernity was necessary to assert influence and gain the ability to proselytize in China freely. One of the first missionaries to establish a Protestant hospital was Dr. Peter Parker, an American missionary who founded the famous Canton

¹⁶ Elman, Benjamin A. *A Cultural History of Modern Science in China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. p.100-102

¹⁷ Yeomans, Neville D. “Health Care in Late Qing Dynasty and Republican China: Western Influences, Chinese Solutions.” *Medical Journal of Australia* 205, no. 11 (2016): 503–5. <https://doi.org/10.5694/mja16.00918>.

¹⁸ Guangqiu, Xu. “The Impact of Medical Missionaries on Chinese Officials: Dr. Peter Parker and the Canton Hospital, 1835-1855.” *The Journal of Presbyterian History (1997-)* 97, no. 1 (2019): 16-28. Accessed May 3, 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26886176>.

hospital's first modern hospital in China. During his time at the Canton Hospital, Dr. Parker was able to treat many patients, caring for around 26,000 patients in 1847 alone. As the renown of Dr. Parker's hospital grew, it also attracted eminent Qing officials and their family members to seek out Parker's services.²⁰ Among these were Lin Zexu and Qiying, Qing officials who were in the direct service of Emperor Daoguang. Lin was appointed the imperial commissioner in charge of stemming the flow of opium into Canton. As he was not in good health, Lin came under the treatment of Dr. Parker, preferring the treatment of Western medicine given its reputation at this time. According to Guangqiu, the two developed a close relationship because of Dr. Parker's treatment of Lin. Parker came to act as an advisor to Lin, encouraging Lin's diplomatic endeavors while "keen on acquiring more advantages for Western traders and missionaries..."²⁰ Additionally, Lin also entrusted Parker to translate sensitive documents for him, and Lin came to advocate for increasing China's relations with the United States to the Emperor. "[Lin's] relatively positive view of Americans seems to owe much to his respect for Western medicine, gained through his experiences with Dr. Parker and his hospital."²⁰

Later, Parker also treated the Governor-General of Guangxi and Guangdong, Qiying, at the Canton Hospital for his long-term skin ailment. After his successful treatment, Qiying gratified Dr. Parker and the Canton hospital with gifts and praise, illustrating the goodwill the Protestants were receiving because of their medical work. Moreover, "Qiying's attitude toward Christianity shifted over the next few years, resulting in a growing sympathy to Christians in China."²⁰ This example also underscores Western medicine's influence over common Chinese people and elite Qing officials. Their dispositions toward the West changed due to the Protestants' efforts to advance medical treatment in China. This is further supported by Charles Estes, who described Parker as having "opened China at the point of his lancet" and also provided another example of how, when missionaries were

expelled from Kwai Peng by hostile officials, they were pacified by the arrival of "a lady physician... [and] in 1893 there were two organized churches in the place."¹⁹ This demonstrates the efficacy of Western medicine in alleviating the Qing officials' intolerance toward Protestant missionaries. As Guangqiu described it, "Western medicine was one of the forces, if not the sole one, that encouraged the Qing officials in Canton to take a positive attitude toward the Canton Hospital."²⁰ Most importantly, while Parker was serving as a doctor, his priority remained on expanding the Western influence in Canton and winning over local officials to create favorable terms for the West and missionaries.

After the Opium war, Parker participated in the American delegation at Wangxia, with him having the advantage of having known or cared for "almost the whole Chinese delegation, including Qiying and his several subordinates." Due in part to the high respect and close relations these officials had towards Parker, the American delegation successfully negotiated the Treaty of Wangxia, with Parker himself stating that "[n]early everything that America could ask, or China consistently concedes, has been secured."²⁰ Additionally, Parker personally included an article in the treaty that provided "the free toleration of Christianity throughout the Empire...leasing of land for businesses and dwellings, burial grounds, and hospitals at the treaty ports." One of Parker's former patients, Pan Shichen, advocated this inclusion on the Chinese side.²⁰ Parker's work in China illustrates how missionaries like him leveraged their positions as medical missionaries to secure favorable terms with Qing officials for the West's interests. Another example of missionaries garnering the favor of Qing officials was the sponsorship of the Protestant hospital in Tientsin by Governor Li Hongzhang after the Protestant missionary, Dr. Mackenzie successfully treated his wife.¹⁹ With their skills in medicine, the

¹⁹ Estes, Charles Sumner. "Christian Missions in China." Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1895. p. 41-44.

Protestant missionaries were able to establish close relations with and influence Qing officials to grant favorable terms to their Western peers and even actively involve themselves in establishing the treaty system, which then precipitated Western domination of Qing China.²⁰ Medical missionaries, therefore, paved the way for further entrenchment of Western influence and appealed to both the Qing officials and the common Chinese, as evidenced by a large number of patients the Protestant mission hospitals saw throughout the 19th century.

From the brief use of medicine in Rubruck's Franciscan mission to the Jesuit missionaries' use of medicine in the Qing court to the Protestant missionaries implementing the treaty system, the influence of medicine in the history of Western relations and diplomacy with the Empires of China is unmistakable. As the science of medicine in the West became more advanced, its implementation by Western missionaries as an allure for the Chinese leadership and common people grew and helped further their interests in proselytization and gaining favor within China. As discussed, the usage of medicine in this manner was especially prevalent in the Jesuit and Protestant missionary periods. The Jesuits were able to gain positions of influence to practice medicine in the Emperor's court and receive permission to proselytize. In contrast, the Protestants gained favorable treatment from local Qing officials, who allowed them to expand their presence and proselytize. More importantly, during the latter period of Protestant activity, the influence of medical missionaries was most felt in China as they actively negotiated with Qing officials, such as in the case of Peter Parker, and made way for other Westerners to expand and achieve their interests in China. Lastly, the influence of missionaries and imperialism is entwined as

²⁰ Bays, Daniel H. *A New History of Christianity in China*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. p.58

both benefited from each other's contributions toward their respective expansions in China. As a result, the history of the medical missionaries is still impactful today, as reflected by the substantial Christian population in China, which resulted in large part from this history of missionary work and the national narratives in China about this period.

Bibliography

- Bays, Daniel H. *A New History of Christianity in China*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
- Dawson, Christopher. *The Mongol Mission: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1955.
- Elman, Benjamin A. *A Cultural History of Modern Science in China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Elman, Benjamin A. *On Their Own Terms Science in China, 1550-1900*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Estes, Charles Sumner. "Christian Missions in China." PhD Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1895.
- Fu, Louis. "Medical Missionaries to China: the Jesuits." *Journal of Medical Biography* 19, no. 2 (2011): 73–79. <https://doi.org/10.1258/jmb.2011.011008>.
- Guangqiu, Xu. "The Impact of Medical Missionaries on Chinese Officials: Dr. Peter Parker and the Canton Hospital, 1835-1855." *The Journal of Presbyterian History (1997-)* 97, no. 1 (2019): 16-28. Accessed May 3, 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26886176>.
- "Protestant Christianity Is Booming in China." *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper. Accessed April 23, 2021. <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/09/15/protestant-christianity-is-booming-in-china>.
- Puente-Ballesteros, Beatriz. "Jesuit Medicine in the Kangxi Court (1662-1722): Imperial Networks and Patronage." *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* 34, no. 1 (2011): 86–162. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26669323-03401005>.
- Ruysbroeck, Willem van, Peter A. Jackson, and David Morgan. *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke, 1253-1255*. Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010.
- Spence, Jonathan Dermot. *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1985.

2022]

Emory Journal of Asian Studies

Yeomans, Neville D. “Health Care in Late Qing Dynasty and Republican China: Western Influences, Chinese Solutions.” *Medical Journal of Australia* 205, no. 11 (2016): 503–5. <https://doi.org/10.5694/mja16.00918>.