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BOOK REVIEW

Johann Schreck Terrentius, SJ: His European Network and the Origins of the Jesuit Library in Peking

Noël Golvers

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Over the past half century, the historiographic image of the Jesuit missionaries in China has arguably shifted from the exceptional to the normal. In the mid-20th century, they were frequently extolled as exceptionally talented “Renaissance Men” by historians such as Joseph Needham, who asserted that, “In the history of intercourse between civilisations there seems no parallel to the arrival in China in the 17th century of a group of Europeans so inspired by religious fervour as were the Jesuits, and at the same time so expert in most of those sciences which had developed with the Renaissance” (Needham and Wang 1959, 437). However, more recent prosopographic studies have cautioned us against such fascination, demonstrating instead that the great majority of China Jesuits were far less unusual, “junior members of the Society of Jesus” who “sailed to Asia in the middle of their academic formation, too soon to have given evidence of genius” (Brockey 2009, 209); and that the “Western Learning (*xixue* 西學)” the Jesuits promoted in Ming-Qing China was by no means progressive “modern” science, but the “particular scientific culture of their religious order” embedded in Jesuit college education, with Aristotelian philosophy as its uniform basis (Jami 2008, 155).

Against this backdrop, it is all the more striking to read Noël Golvers’s magisterial new book on the Swiss missionary Johann Schreck Terrentius (1576-1630), who stands out as an archetypal Renaissance polymath with wide-ranging and often unorthodox intellectual interests. Born in Bingen, Terrentius’s early itinerary as a “wandering scholar” brought him to no less than forty different academic sites across Europe, from Paris, Montpellier, and Rome to Rostock, Breslau, and Prague, where he frequented alchemical circles around universities and courts, and taught private courses in twelve disciplines including mathematics, meteorology, the art of memory, and exotic languages. By the time he joined the Jesuits in 1611 and departed for China in 1616, he was an established scholar and member of the prestigious Accademia dei Lincei in Rome, having shouldered high-profile scholarly projects such as the editing of the *Tesoro Messicano*, a New World natural history by the Spanish royal physician Francisco Hernández. His contemporaries compared him to household names of European intellectual history: a “Pliny of the Indies” (p. 516), a “second Viète” (p. 539),

and “a wondrous man, the second only after Campanella” yet capable of “much better experiments” (p. 454).

This book, however, is “not a detailed, linear biography of Terrentius”, but rather an exploration of “his intellectual background and his network of learned acquaintances” (p. 12). Chapter 1 follows the three stages of Terrentius’s “European tour”: his early training from Freiburg to Rome (ca. 1590 to 1610); his Roman years as a scholar then as a Jesuit (1610-15); and his second pan-European journey (1616-18), ahead of his departure to China, from Rome to Lisbon through Germany and the Spanish Low Countries, during which he and the Belgian Jesuit Nicolas Trigault gathered a large number of books and instruments for the China mission. Chapter 2, “The People”, reconstructs Terrentius’s network, identifying all personal names mentioned in his sizable correspondence in various European archives, most importantly that with Johann Faber (1574-1629), the Papal botanist and secretary of the Accademia dei Lincei (Fondo Faber at the Biblioteca Corsiniana in Rome). Arranged in two alphabetical lists, these names include some 150 constituting Terrentius’s “direct circle of acquaintances”, complemented by 22 other indirect contacts. Each person’s entry offers a full summary of primary sources concerning his relationship with Terrentius.

Chapter 3 moves on to a similar, item-by-item examination of the books and instruments Terrentius knew of, used, and gathered with a view to a “complete library of all Western science in China” (p. 308). They are presented in three alphabetical lists – ca. 60 authors appearing in Terrentius’s correspondence with Faber; 331 books bought at the Officina Plantiniana in Antwerp, as revealed by the archives of the famous printing house; and 75 books still extant today in the National Library of Beijing bearing the inscription “Missionis Sinensis”. Chapter 4 returns the focus to “the personality behind it all”, analysing the “multiple competences of the polymath Terrentius” under ten headings: medicine; mineralogy; botany; mathematics; astronomy; calendar; magnetism; cryptography; linguistics; encyclopedism.

Golvers’s book builds on a thorough exploration of archival sources, clearing up many misconceptions about Terrentius’s career while unearthing scores of fascinating details. For instance, contrary to popular belief, we learn that it is “doubtful” Terrentius was

ever a regular student of Galileo during his years in Padua (p. 31); the latter, as a fellow Lincean, was nevertheless among the first to be informed of Terrentius's decision to join the Jesuits, and spoke of this decision as a "great loss to our Company [i.e. Accademia dei Lincei]" in favour of "the other Company [i.e. the Society of Jesus]" (p. 48–49). We learn that Terrentius did not join the Jesuits in order to go to China, but as the result of a decade-long spiritual quest, and his exact motives for later joining the China mission remain unknowable: the Jesuit archives related to his admission into the Society contain not a single mention of China, and his application letter for the mission cannot be found (pp. 49–54). Mainly focusing on Terrentius's European career, the book also offers rare glimpses into his scientific activities in China: his promise to send Chinese astronomical records to Galileo (p. 187); his now lost correspondence with Kepler (p. 206); his botanical exchanges with Jesuits in Manila, Malacca, Goa, Cochinchina, Arabia, and Ethiopia (p. 492); even a report on the post-mortem autopsy he performed in Hangzhou on his fellow Jesuit Sabatino de Ursis (p. 470).

To what extent does this wealth of new information about one individual affect our broader understanding of the Jesuits' role as cultural brokers between Europe and China? Terrentius's scholarly credentials are certainly exceptional, if not unique, among China Jesuits. Tellingly, he is the only one to have been known by a Latinate name, which Golvers interprets as indicating a "programme": "Terrentius" was both an etymological play on his German name Schreck ("fright" => Latin "terr-or"), and a tribute to the Roman polymath Marcus Terrentius Varro (fl. 116–27), author of the first Roman encyclopaedia (pp. 517, 533). But Golvers also uses this well-documented career as a gateway into the scholarly world of Catholic Europe at the turn of the 17th century, its multi-layered geographies, its interlocking networks of patronage, collaboration, and competition, as well as the material conditions of its intellectual economy in which books, instruments, letters, and rumours all circulated. Readers can effectively read chapters 1–3 as a roadmap of European centres of learning, an address book of the Republic of Letters, and a complete library catalogue. While no other China

Jesuit's early career was as well documented as Terrentius's, this was the world they all navigated, and which they strove to extend to China.

The book also raises provocative questions about the nature of "Western Learning" with respect to its European roots, as it reveals a striking discrepancy between Terrentius's scholarly background and the legacy he ultimately left in China. According to the "final assessment" offered in the concluding chapter, Terrentius's European career was notable for his "holistic approach" to learning as well as his "unconventional convictions and practices", particularly transmutational alchemy (p. 543) – his correspondence spoke unambiguously of the philosopher's pleasure to "build a perfect body [of gold] from sulphur and mercury" (p. 456). Yet this holism seems entirely lost in translation: in the scholarship based on Chinese sources, his name appears in discrete specialised branches of the history of science, for his brief involvement in the imperial calendar reform (from 1629 till his untimely death in 1630), in connection with his one publication on mechanics (*Yuanxi qiqi tushuo* 遠西奇器圖說, 1628), and one posthumous publication on anatomy (*Taixi renshen shuogai* 泰西人身說概, 1643). While mechanics grew from a "marginal" subject in his library to the topic of Terrentius's most influential Chinese-language work (p. 439), his "whole collection of books on alchemy" left "no reported impact" in China (p. 15). Western Learning appears here both less and more than the European sciences Terrentius carried in his baggage. The chasm between these two interrelated bodies of knowledge, which historians have never before been able to measure in such detail, certainly deserves further exploration.

Thus this masterly book goes far beyond the colourful personality of Terrentius. This outstanding individual case constitutes an exceptionally contained opportunity for exploring the tensions between European input and Chinese reception, between individual inclinations and corporate agenda, and between structural conditions and contingent factors, all of which lie at the core of historical debates concerning early modern Sino-Western contact.

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