

# The Fathers of Sinology

## From the Ricci Method to Léon Wieger's Remedies

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Informing the Superior General of the Society of Jesus that the cornerstone of the Jesuit mission in China – that is, Father Matteo Ricci – had passed away on 3 May 1610, Father Pasio wrote:

Fu servito Nostro Signore di chiamare al paradiso il buon P. Matteo Ricci, tanto antico nella Cina, e che accreditò molto la legge di Dio e la Compagnia con la sua santità, prudentia e patientia, aprendo il cammino agli altri Padri in quella folta selva di gentilità.<sup>1</sup>

Approximately three centuries later, a man whom Father Delatre unhesitatingly called “our indefatigable Sinologist” – Father Léon Wieger – also died on Chinese soil.<sup>2</sup>

In 1577, Matteo Ricci, the son of a pharmacist, left his native town, Macerata, for the East Indies and from there went on to China, where he was to remain until his death twenty-seven years later.

In 1880, at the age of twenty-four, Léon Wieger, a doctor like his father before him, would shut down his office in Strasbourg to enter into the Society of Jesus. He was to leave for China seven years later, on 19 September 1887, and to remain in the Celestial Empire for forty-six years. Like his illustrious predecessor, Father Wieger donned the habit of a mandarin, set about Christianizing the Chinese without wresting them from their own culture, and did not become vexed when one of them said, like the Emperor when he saw a painting of Christ, “*Questo è pagoda viva!*”

*Ut Christo Sinas lucrifacerem*, these two Jesuits, who were separated by three centuries, both acquired an excellent knowledge of the Chinese language and writing system. Not only could they say mass in Chinese (Father Wieger would use the vernacular rather than classical Chinese), but they could also converse with the mandarins and study classical writings. They understood that in

order to penetrate this world where “people devour books” (Matteo Ricci) it was necessary to master the tools of the learned men before forcing their hand. Both missionaries were to achieve great success, measured not by the number of converts they made among the Chinese, but through their books, their translations, and, to borrow Father Ricci’s term, their *cosette* (“little things”). Forgoing any effort to Europeanize the Chinese, the two missionaries instead became “Sinified,” as if the Middle Empire had finally enabled them to come into their own. In their eyes, China had too much virtue not to be Christian, but if it remained pagan, that was not sufficient cause for seeing it as wicked.

In a letter written in Nanchang on 4 November 1595, Matteo Ricci enumerated the six reasons for his renown:

I. “The fact that I am a foreigner come from so far away, along with my knowledge of spoken and written Chinese.”

He traveled over 100,000 *li* to come to China .... Now he is perfectly capable of speaking our language, writing our characters, and following our customs with propriety. He is a thoroughly remarkable man. Extremely refined within, he is as simple as can be on the outside. I have already met him three times and I do not know what his purpose is in coming here. It seems to me that if he wanted to substitute his own teachings for those of the duke of Zhou and of Confucius, that would be truly stupid. That must not be what he came for.<sup>3</sup>

In 1608, two years before his death, while suffering from frequent migraines, Father Ricci published a work entitled *The Ten Chapters of the Strange Man*. In it he speaks of himself and his singularity: the Chinese were curious about his long beard, sunken eyes, and large nose, as well as his prodigious memory, his inexplicable celibacy, and his faith in God, which spared him from the fear of even death itself. To readers in the Empire, this text recalled Confucius’s maxim: “The strange man is strange to other men, but he resembles heaven.”

II. “My amazing memory. I can recite by heart the Four Books of Confucius.”<sup>4</sup>

III. “My knowledge of mathematics and astronomy.” Father Ricci had an accurate notion of the role of astronomy in the future of the Mission in China. The optical and measuring instruments that the Jesuits showed at court did not fail to fascinate the Emperor and his entourage. If the missionaries knew that the Chinese would remain

skeptical with respect to religion, the Jesuits had no doubt of the surprise that would be elicited by their knowledge of the sciences.<sup>5</sup>

IV. "The unusual objects that I carry with me."

On 28 January 1601, the Emperor accepted gifts from Matteo Ricci, who accompanied them with this letter *Reverenter Scripsi*:

Your servant from the Great West comes to you respectfully to offer you some objects from his country .... These are an image of the Lord of Heaven, two images of the Mother of God, a book of prayer, a crucifix adorned with precious stones, two chiming clocks, a map of the world, and a European harpsichord. Their value is not great but as they come from the Far West, they will appear rare and curious. Moreover, like the cress and sunshine offered by a poor villager, they will serve as a token of your servant's esteem ....

The crucifix was ill received by the Chinese, who were outraged that "a criminal from the Western Kingdom in the Han era [A.D. 206-208]"<sup>6</sup> should be deified. The sweet image of the Madonna was preferred to that of the suffering Christ, but the Chinese traded sniggering rumors that the God of blue-eyed, dragon-bearded men was nothing but a woman! They were more favorably surprised by the pictorial technique used: "The eyebrows, the eyes, and the folds of the garment are like an image captured by a mirror and poised to start moving of its own accord."<sup>7</sup>

The *Zi ming zhong* 自鳴鐘, "the bells that chimed on their own," frequently broke down and came under criticism in a pamphlet issued during the 1630s under the title *Ricci invented fables to deceive the world*. As for the harpsichord, it was not used to best advantage in the ensemble formed by the missionaries in 1698 at the behest of the Emperor Kang Xi:

Never having played together, their Reverences were caught unprepared. The Fathers armed themselves – one with a flute, the second with a harpsichord, the third with a bass viol, the fourth with a violin, and the fifth with a bassoon. These various instruments formed a cacophonous symphony, with the result that upon hearing the beginning, the Emperor fled with his hands over his ears, crying "Enough, that will do!" (cited by Pelliot)<sup>8</sup>

V. "The alchemist's talents that are ascribed to me."

At the end of the sixteenth century, Matteo Ricci met a *Feng liu* 風流, a learned man, who was "as free as the wind" – in other words, a libertine who was an alchemy enthusiast; the young man thought the Jesuit capable of transforming cinnabar into silver.

After their interviews, the libertine proclaimed himself, as Jean Lacouture reports, a “disciple of the Great Magician .... It is well known that there were few means to which Ricci would not resort in order to lure a soul ‘into the net’ ... But all the same, magic!”<sup>9</sup> We shall see that, three centuries later, Father Léon Wieger practiced some variants of this aspect of the “Ricci method,” which can be summed up in the declaration made by one of the missionary’s mandarin friends: “If you tell the truth on this point, you will be believed on the rest.”

Religion occupies the sixth and final position in Matteo Ricci’s list of the reasons for his success.

VI. “Interest in the religion that I teach. (Many people come to see me for this reason.)”

The narration of Father Wieger’s life will cast light on Father Ricci’s sixth and last argument and on the following maxim, held to by some members of the Society: “Why convert if you converge?” Even without the advantage of surprise that had benefited his predecessor when setting foot for the first time in the Yellow Land, Father Wieger achieved glory, and yet his name is unknown among contemporary Sinologists (apart from letters of condolence, nothing has been written about him). Yet his work made it possible to fulfill the wishes of the eighteenth-century philosophers whom the dénouement of the Chinese rites controversy had left wanting. Father Wieger’s work cannot be plucked as simply one more *offering of celery* 芹齋 that is chanced upon in the exotic warehouse of contemporary Sino-science, which is all too often stocked with pedantries and flowery fribbles. We must extract what we can and drink it without ever slaking our thirst, drawing from it again and again until at last we taste its essence of jade 玉液.

Father Léon Wieger died on 25 March 1933, at the age of seventy-seven years, in his little room in Xian Xin – the very place where he had written more than 40,000 pages in French, Chinese, and Latin, which were diffused throughout China and (when he wished it so) farther afield, in Europe. Shortly before his death, Father Wieger was congratulated by Cardinal Merry Del Val in the name of Pope Pius X, and praised by Father Desmarquet, Father Couvreur, Paul Pelliot, and the director of the Catholic Bulletin of Beijing:

This man, whose activities extended into so many different areas, whose name is to be read on so many volumes in the libraries of both worlds, is a modest man who lives in seclusion. Far from seeking noisy publicity, he flees it. Travelers who wish to interview him as they would a celebrity do not succeed .... We consider that, through his works on the Chinese language and other aspects of Chinese life, Father Wieger has been of immeasurable service to the Missions and to the missionaries of China.

The Sinologist was to respond to this chorus of praise in a letter dated 6 August 1932:

You have truly understood the sole intention that has guided my life, and the goal at which I have aimed for so many years is precisely the one that you still desire and that I hope to accomplish, if it please God, before I descend into the grave. My rules of conduct are very simple: to be of one heart with all, since we are a cause, a thing; to recognize only when absolutely necessary the divisions that men have imposed upon this world, the whole unbearable grid into whose boxes we have forcibly parcelled out God's children. Lacking the leisure for maintaining a correspondence, I have not had time to have friends; as for enemies, I have only one: the enemy of God. I commend to your prayers the end of the worker and his work. My body may be falling into ruin, but the spirit and the soul are still well, ever better ....

Suffering from a heart condition that had long since spelled his demise, Father Wieger nevertheless finished what he considered to be the most important of his works, his *Apologetic Controversies for Use by the Chinese*. This was to be his last publication, after the second edition of his *Philosophical Texts*, and after an article on the spirituality of the Chinese, commissioned by the director of the Archivum historicum Societatis Jesu.

In the 1920s, China threw off the yoke of its imperial past and found itself torn apart by the Warlords who were exploiting the newly formed Republic in the throes of its adolescent crisis. Ranging far and wide throughout his curacy, Father Wieger gave free rein to the monkey of spirit and the horse of thought. He produced a series of books illustrating the headlong rush into ruin that precipitated "Modern China in Chaos." Others in the Society did not neglect to note the historical interest of these volumes, which, along with summaries of newspaper articles, contained almanacs and Syllabi that served as "toothing stones for future controversies"; nor did they fail to wonder about the titles, which they found "rather strange" and "picturesque – somewhat too picturesque for certain tastes": *The Rising Flood* (1921); *Eddies and*

*Foam* (1922); *The Aeolian Goatskin* (1923); *Nationalism* (1924); *Lighting the Powder* (1925); *Boom!* (1927); and *Chaos* (1931).

"These volumes," wrote Paul Pelliot, "give a vivid impression of the current concerns and tendencies of Chinese youth. The author's approach is strictly objective. The Chinese cannot gainsay anything in it: everything, virtues and flaws alike, must be acknowledged as theirs."

As we will see, the commentaries that Dr. Léon Wieger took the liberty of making in his own works are permeated with the bold humor that was so well suited to the tough yet peaceful face of the former doctor from Strasbourg. One of his Syllabi contains a response to a Chinese reader. "Reading these dense, vital pages," writes Alexandre Brou, "one feels that, had Father Wieger stayed in Europe, he would have made an eloquent if sometimes caustic journalist; above all, even better, he would be a journalist who knew whereof he spoke."<sup>10</sup> Brou was reacting to the following lines: "No, a hundred times no, to the anonymous penpusher of the Daily of Chen Zhou, who dared write that the venerable ancients of China were make-believe .... The testimony of Chinese scholars for twenty-five centuries reduces your squib to nothingness ..."

The venerable ancients, many of whose writings Léon Wieger translated and annotated, represent the other side of the Chinese medal that he sported during the late 1920s with only its modern face showing. But in 1929, Father Wieger, hesitating between heads and tails, wondered whether he should continue his research in ancient or modern Sinology.

At this hour, in newspapers throughout the world, news abounds and over-abounds. The more they read, the less readers understand. They are confronted with an impenetrable tangle, an amorphous mess. This is inevitably the impression created by contemporary China. I will try to distinguish planes, to define groups, to filter the light. Perhaps after reading what I have written, some will say: "That's all there is to it?!" and judge me too simplistic. Others will resent me for having too casually snuffed out some ghosts that had seemed imposing to them. This matters little to me. I have placed my pen in the service of truth, not of sentiment. In ancient Chinese physics, nothing was more important than certain hidden currents, supposed to determine prosperity and decay, life and death. All of China then believed in Feng Shui,<sup>11</sup> in those transcendent influences. I myself believe that the entire future of modern China depends on certain moral currents – just as unseen – that have developed in the last thirty years.

This intuition of events to come in China did not persuade Father Wieger to continue his series of books beyond *Boom!* and *Chaos*. He wrote to his superiors to seek their advice.

The important thing is that I no longer have the strength to keep *Ancient Sinology* and *Modern China* going at the same pace. I must sacrifice one of the two. I am seeking to resolve this point.

1) Ancient Sinology: I am the uncontested, definitive, sole Master of this undertaking. My two works, *Philosophical Texts* and *Historical Texts*, are out of print; they await recasting for new editions. They represent calm, profound work that I love. But dead things, soon to be forgotten. These two books will remain. Everyone will make use of them and no one will thank me for them. Some (like Father Couvreur) will think me already dead, even fossilized ... And that will be that. But what does the Society think? I think this notion would be shared by the Very Reverend Father General, by the Father Provincial ... A block of scientific concrete on top of which amateurs will set up their fly-by-night carnival booths.

2) Modern China: long drawn-out research, often fruitless, always exhausting. Difficult, painstaking work that makes the spirit and the heart suffer ... If only it could still advance the good cause! But I doubt that it can do so among the Sons of Light ... As for the unbelievers, they will benefit, that much is sure. But is it my calling to serve those people? And then they are transitory volumes. Excellent material for later, for the books we will not write. But for now they satisfy the curiosity of the moment. Whence the demand that so impressed your predecessor. Many bookstores have said that my *philosophical-historical* books are consistently requested and thoroughly studied by a large number of serious people (*sic* ...?).

I don't want any more English translations. Scholars read me in French. English benefits Protestants, and it is not my goal to do so.

(The works of Léon Wieger were at the time distributed in Britain and the United States.)

The response given to this request, dated 3 February 1929, was: "Ancient Sinology." Father Wieger was able to reissue his books and to reflect on his famous *Apologetic Controversies for Use by the Chinese*. He confided on 4 December 1931:

As a theologian, I am very cautious, but I see far and wide into the infinite and its works ... Augustinian flights of fancy do not frighten me. I am not troubled by what to say ... but as certain hypotheses or possibilities come up, I wish to consult as to whether they may be conceded to the adversary as possible hypotheses that are not contrary to Christian dogma. On these points I would like to sound out the opinions of Rome and of the Society. You must have access to a very broad-minded and very reliable theologian who could tell me in a word, yes or no. For example: whether the Pekinese may not be allowed to retain the hypothesis that they did not drown during

the Flood.<sup>12</sup> Whether the hypothesis of multiple incarnations of the Word may be conceded to the Amidists ... that would be a triumph: different incarnations in different inhabited worlds, naturally, therefore two hypotheses ... a question that has been examined by Catejan.

The faithful Father Wieger, following his natural bent, was to return all the more eagerly to Ancient Sinology as he came to understand the living ideograms, termed modern, that cropped up in the streets of Shanghai and Beijing.

At the beginning of the century, I said that the apologetic relevance of the Chinese philosophical texts had diminished, given the transformation of old China that was then beginning. The ancient land has certainly changed in appearance since becoming a Republic. But what about its ideas? ... Well, it is also a fact that, beneath the American *feelings* that certain young people have sprinkled over the surface, like an exotic mold that cannot take root ... it is a fact, I say, that deep down, on the inside, the Chinese people still think the way they thought for milleniums, ever since their distant origins. Confucius is no longer the author studied by school-children; he is more than that, for he is recognized as the moralist, the economist, and the political theorist of China.<sup>13</sup> Taoism, which had sunk to the level of a superstition, the object of scorn and fear, is now considered by certain scholars as belonging to the nation's popular philosophy. Buddhism, whose good old legends could inspire no more than a smile, regained force in China, as it did in Japan, in its Mahayanist or Amidist forms, claiming minds by virtue of its idealism and hearts by virtue of its gentle charity. There is undoubtedly a revivification, or *revival* as the Chinese now say, in English, of Confucianism, as there is of Taoism and of Buddhism in its refined form. That is what led to the decision to publish this second edition of *Philosophical Texts*.

Not in order that the contents of this book may serve to attack people who are best humored ... (he who is not an enemy is a friend ...) [W]e must not gratuitously attack good people whose thoughts are fundamentally good, erring only in form. Let us conserve our forces to combat the modern hydra of false scientism, a monster whose multiple heads include atheism, unbelief, amoralism, monism, historical untruth, anarchy, communism, and others.

Here again, Father Wieger reawakens the ghost of the Chinese rites controversy. *We must not gratuitously attack good people whose thoughts are fundamentally good, erring only in form.* As Leibniz had supposed,<sup>14</sup> the Jesuits, after spending a long time in China, eventually admitted that the Chinese possessed a natural theology. *One supreme being, no mumbo jumbo:* this fit the bill for Voltaire, who paid homage to Confucius as follows:



The interpreter of salutary reason alone,  
Enlightening minds without dazzling the world,  
He spoke only as a wise man, never a Prophet,  
And yet he was believed, even in his own land.<sup>15</sup>

The only thing the Chinese lacked was Grace: how to convert them? By bringing them back to the spirit of their ancestors, as Father Verjus suggested to Leibniz in 1705. To convert the Chinese meant to convert them to themselves, to the spirit of ancient China. That is why, from the beginning, the Jesuits evinced great tolerance – excessive tolerance, in the eyes of Rome – for things Chinese. When Léon Wieger published the new edition of his *Chinese Philosophical Texts*, he was no longer the good worker of China in the far-flung grassroots curacy, nor the soldier obeying the strategy that Matteo Ricci had expressed in the phrase “*tirare Confucio alla nostra opinione*,” even if it meant having no time to himself – “to the point where he would sometimes even forget to say mass” (Gernet, 18). For Ricci, the way to convince the listener or reader was by enlisting the expressions of China’s own great wise men in the service of Christianity. “I have taken great care,” wrote Ricci, “to draw to our side (*tirare alla nostra opinione*) the principal master of the sect of learned men, Confucius: for I have interpreted to our advantage some writings that were ambiguous (*alcune cose che aveva lasciate scritte dubiose*)” (Etiemble, vol. 1, 256).

Father Wieger, “our indefatigable Sinologist,” recognized this tactical ditty for what it was. At the end of the first volume of his *Philosophical Texts*, he leaves the reader with the following warning:

In conclusion, I should like to offer you some friendly advice. Always refrain from using the contents of this volume as proofs or arguments in your evangelism. Do not try to stand the truth upon such weak feet of clay. Do not allow yourself, like a mere juggler, to preach using quotations from the Chinese classics .... Well! the learned listeners will think, this man has learned something from us!

What, then, constitutes the Wieger method? From his first years in China, he observed:

Formerly (in Strasbourg), when I had donned the doctoral hood, I nearly fell victim to the naive belief that I knew something *de omni re scibili*. Well, since the Good Lord sent me to China, every day I have shed some of this smugness; every day I am learning by leaps and bounds – not without some embarrassment, for how can a Western doctor be ignorant of so many elementary things?

Bypassing the Chinese reluctance to be baptized, and the deception practiced by “converts” (as Monseigneur Bulté wrote, “Only when he is dead can we be sure of the conversion of a Chinese person”), the Western physician started out by continuing to practice his profession, which he adapted to Chinese custom not without resorting to stratagems worthy of “yellow mischief”: “The professional physician in China,” wrote Father Wieger, “is quite a respected figure. He does not receive honoraria in the strict sense. As he is obligated to no one, he must be invited, begged, chauffeured about, entertained ... Anyone who is cured will remain bound to him by obligatory ties of gratitude ...”

Why not assimilate this obligatory gratitude to a conversion? Father Wieger organized a Central Office which distributed medicines that were made according to European formulas and labeled with Chinese names. (Oh holy remedy!) He created thirty-six potions that the catechists and virgins of the Mission handed out at no charge to their pagan patients, in the form of little packets accompanied by a Chinese sales pitch along with a brief and precise statement of the dosage, also in Chinese. Father Wieger’s remedy number three was called “sponge water,” with a blurb that read as follows:

This remedy is appropriate for all sick children, whether their illness is of recent onset or of long standing.

When the vital spirit is diminished and close to disappearing, when the limbs are cold, when the eyes roll upwards, the child can no longer weep; he is like the lamp that has run out of oil and is on the verge of going out.

Other remedies will cease to have any effect on him, but this remedy will still work its effect. There is no longer cause for saying that nothing can be done, that you have no power to help.

Directions for the use of remedy number three: Take a cup of pure, luke-warm water, soak the sponge in it, then dribble the juice from the sponge over the forehead.

To increase the power of this remedy, use it with number thirteen, stimulating seed.

Who can say how many children owed their baptism to Dr. Wieger, S. J., by means of this innocent stratagem? The Chinese women who treated their children with this remedy in the missionaries’ medical centers naturally had no way of knowing that the “sponge water” was holy water. “Until the day he died,”

recounts Father H. Bernard, "he liked to read the notes in which the missionaries enumerated the hundreds and thousands of dying children who had received the "sponge juice."

But as with Father Ricci, who had turned cinnabar into silver in order to gain a disciple, alchemy was not the sole reason for Father Wieger's success. "Speak to them in the language of their celestial country, missionaries, they will thrill to your voice, and you will have fulfilled your mission!" Father Wieger speedily composed a six-volume textbook which enabled newly arrived missionaries to acquire a mastery of spoken Chinese in one year and a knowledge of literary Chinese in two years. Of these volumes, two are essential: *Popular Tales* (on the vernacular language) and *Chinese Characters* (etymological lessons and ancient forms of script).

This was the first time that the etymology of Chinese ideograms had been systematically studied without an attempt to manipulate them until the figure of the Trinity became apparent. The enigma of the antediluvian Chinese people was nearly resolved by the application of such far-fetched methods to the exegesis of the Chinese character signifying *boat* 船. This character is made up of three elements: embarcation 舟, eight 八, and mouth 口. All that remains is to count the number of "mouths" present on Noah's Ark. Noah's three sons and their wives make six mouths; with Noah and his own wife, the total is precisely eight – proof positive that the Chinese did indeed experience the Flood!

In his preface to the book that was intended to dash once and for all this type of absurd and twisted rumor, concocted by the symbolists of Dogma, Father Wieger wrote:

The idea for this book was suggested to me by the following passage by Etienne Fourmont: "Numquid praeter tot tantaque dictionaria adhuc necessarium? ... Esset super opus quoddam magnum post dictionaria usalia edendum nobis, ubi comparerent characteres, ut quotquot sunt a primis authoribus ex iisdem lineamentis compositi, idem, secundem lineas suas et omnimodam similitudinem ordinati. Quorsum autem? Quo perspiceretur, et characterum ipsorum analogia, et praecipue eorum qui rem tantam invenerunt authorum mens ac sagacitas. *Linguae sinicae grammatica*, 1742."

The Latin may be bad, but the idea is a good one. To analyze the original structure of the characters, then to group them according to their elements in a system that is both logical and synoptic ... I am thrashing out this idea at leisure .... Certain explanations put forward in earlier times by Europeans, belonging to the realm of fantasy, I have thought best to pass over in

silence. Fourmont assumed that the analysis of Chinese characters would provoke admiration for the genius of their inventors. Instead, it reveals very simple men, very naive things, a very ancient past ... 10 October 1899.

At the beginning of the year 1900, Léon Wieger, riding high on the success of his first writings, published 968 pages on *Moral Tenets and Customs in China*, which were translated into English, and the celebrated *Popular Tales*. The latter took many readers by surprise: expecting to find a “popular handbook on” the author’s faith, readers found an immense monograph on the language, customs and daily life of the Chinese people. Father Delattre saw humor in Wieger’s preface to his *Tales* :

In keeping with the plan of the *Rudiments*, these *Popular Tales* were collected and published with two objectives in mind:

First, in order to provide authentic models of *real spoken Chinese*, its expressions, phraseology, speech rhythms and intonations. This volume contains nothing in the way of that hybrid gibberish invented by certain gentlemen (*Xian Sheng*<sup>16</sup>) for their barbaric clients. From beginning to end, everything is Chinese Chinese.

Secondly, besides the language, these *Tales* have much to teach about *things Chinese*. They contain a multitude of precise notions – on private life, on domestic habits, on the practice of religion, on the ways of thinking and doing proper to this great people, so unlike others, so little known, and so misjudged. This volume is devoid of the twopenny intuitions promulgated by the modern hack or the sensationalist globe-trotter. If that sort of psychologizing sociologist takes the *boy* that waited on them while their boat put in at Canton or Shanghai and multiplies this stereotype by four hundred million, calling the resulting arithmetic ghost *China*, too bad for those gawking fools who fall for it. As for myself, being neither a novelist nor a charlatan, I have truly put my pen in the service of the people among whom I live, and whom I love. I have let them speak for and depict themselves in these simple, lively tales. I sign this volume not as its author, but as the faithful scribe of a facsimile.

The missionaries who put to the test the language of these *Tales* confided to their author:

Your language is not a language fabricated in an interview with some pedant in an ivory tower, who “for the sake of literature” uses only unintelligible phrases; the language you give us is the real thing. To make sure of this, all one need do is read a few passages to some school-children. Straightaway, they will start paying attention, then their faces will beam in recognition as they hear expressions that are familiar to them ...

Léon Wieger’s writings continued to lift the veil from the soul of the Chinese heartland. Lay and clerical readers alike saluted the

Jesuit's work. In 1909 he published *The Folklore of Modern China*, in 1910 *Buddhism*, in 1911 *Taoism*, in 1913 *Wisdom of the Daoist Masters* and *The Chinese Lives of Buddha*, in 1917 *A History of Religious Beliefs and Philosophical Opinions in China from the Beginning to the Present Time*, and in 1920 *China throughout the Ages*. Three times the Academy of Inscriptions awarded him the Stanislas Julien Prize; the Academic Society of International History in Paris ranked him among the world's foremost scholars of Chinese studies. Faced with these honors, realizing that his works were read not only by missionaries and by the Superior General but also by Sinologists and by dramatists of signs, Father Wieger began to have doubts, and declared:

Perhaps I have better things to do than to write for Europeans; I am tormented by this idea. However:

1. These questions may elicit interest in Europe for their bearing on apologetics.
2. Nobody else has had a grasp on them for a long time, as I have had by now. It cost me fifteen years of toil and sweat .... Others are poking around in little holes, whereas I have made syntheses, sometimes fortuitous ones. Those Sinologists who are unbelievers will not appreciate everything I've written, naturally! Will the God-fearing even read me? Everything that is written about China in Europe is always more or less off the mark, but would the real truth be palatable?

Wieger realized then that there was a recipe he did not want to follow. His works were sought after by amateurs in search of too much real-life detail; he thus decided to publish only expurgated versions. But those who were qualified to judge entreated him for more, and would not be put off by his objections. Father Wieger was unable to *chew on wax*: he had too much to write, and his heart condition weighed on him more and more every day. "Weary of waiting for travelers to become philologists, the philologist made himself a traveler."

Still, not wanting to give in to the distraction of popular success, he confided his doubts to his Superior Major, the Very Reverend Father Wernz of the Society of Jesus: "Should I continue my life as a writer or should I retire?" The response: "Let your Reverence continue his task of writing as long as it shall please his Superiors." Reassured by this order, our master of things Chinese was no longer a Sinologist in spite of himself, and pursued his research more than ever, extending its purview to Japan.

In 1911, Father Wieger visited the Library of Zikawei. In an article entitled "Libri Sacra Fames,"<sup>17</sup> he told how he had managed to gain admittance into the private collections of His Imperial Majesty the Mikado:

I was up to my ears in books, but it wasn't long before I realized that the true rareties were indeed located where my intuition had led me to believe they were – that is, in the shogun's library .... I gained access to it, as well as to the catalog. There were such marvels there. I requested the rarest book of all. The librarian, who an instant before had been so helpful and pleasant, was nonplussed.

"What's the matter?"

"This is impossible!"

"Come on! ..."

"No, it's not possible to see this book. It is no longer here."

"Posh! Then why would it be in the catalog?! ..."

The book was in the private library that was reserved for His Imperial Majesty the Mikado, where no ordinary person was allowed to enter ... the Library of the Tiger. After having gained admittance to this *sanctum sanctorum*, I pointed out what I wanted. All the employees had entered the little room ... they were arrayed along the walls, itching with curiosity. What was I going to do? After all, the Chinese pedestal I was about to mount was held in worshipful awe by them. I took in the situation. After lifting it up in both hands with great respect, I opened the precious treatise on alchemy and indulged myself in reading in Chinese fashion, in a low voice, in modulated tones. An instant later I had the entire staff huddled over me, following along in the book. Everyone, right down to the little tea servers, had come running. I said offhandedly in English: "In our day the retorts are constructed differently from what this drawing shows, and here is the formula for the chemical reaction explained on this page ..." It was immediately clear to them that I understood the meaning of what I had been reading so fluently. There was an explosion of commentary:

"*Shinono*, he's Chinese!"

"No! *Doitsuno hakushi*, he's a German doctor!"

"*Shensei*, he's a master!"

The almond eyes of the little tea servers had become round with wonder. I basked in admiration before the Door of the Tiger. In an instant, they retired discreetly, and I was surrounded by a respectful silence.

I set myself a ration of thirty to forty volumes to peruse per day. Everything I requested was brought to me instantly. After three days, the librarian said to me confidentially: "There are still other secret catalogs; if you wish to see them, everything is at your disposal."

Naturally, I wished to see them, and my notebooks were filled with copious notes ....

Of all these gentlemen, two learned men knew a few words of English; the others spoke only Japanese. But I conversed easily with all of them, by writing the ideograms that were common to Chinese and Japanese. These were curious conversations, with two men seated side by side before a long strip of paper, writing alternately – one a question, the other an answer. In this way I imparted a fair amount of information about Chinese literature. Among the questions asked: the similarities and differences between the German poet Goethe and the Chinese poet Li Pai.<sup>18</sup>

A month later, having finished his research, Léon Wieger closed the Door of the Tiger, left Tokyo, and returned to Beijing to pry open the mysterious cabinets of a famous Taoist temple.

Experience has taught me that, in such a situation, what works best is to approach the matter head-on, with a friendly impertinence. After having groped my way up a very steep staircase, I followed the abbot into a completely dark room. However, two novices eventually managed to unfasten a shutter, and daylight entered into the room .... We were in the private oratory of the Taoist priests, a huge rectangle .... Behind three fine statues of the Three Pure Ones stood four large cabinets. There was what I was after! I stopped short. The abbot capitulated. The seals were broken, the cabinets were opened, and I delved into the boxes. Splendid Ming volumes<sup>19</sup>, wrapped in yellow silk! I did my verifications, handling the books with respect, taking them out and replacing them delicately. The owners of the books were visibly moved and touched by the love I expressed for these precious objects. When I had finished, I had the cabinets closed so their contents would not become cold ...

The time had come to ask the crucial question. Just to have seen these treasures was something, but I wanted more. There were unique, unknown, unsuspected items in the collection. My heart was thumping. I mastered myself and asked in the most indifferent tone of voice: "What if I were to have some of these volumes copied? What do you think?"

Father Wieger was authorized to copy whatever he wanted within the chiaroscuro of the Taoist temple. Through the tireless movement of his wrist, our researcher was able to retrace the history of the formation of the Holy Embryo (聖胎 *Sheng Tai*, the Taoist way to immortality) and to write the more than one thousand pages of *The Canon of Taoism* and *Wisdom of the Daoist Masters*. Léon Wieger then appeared to be satisfied not only for "having finally found everything," but also because he had not written a single line before having laid hold of and tamed the original documents. "I feel a very deep satisfaction, that of having spent twenty years obtaining documentation, of having avoided that sort of parthenogenesis – so widespread in this century of journals and reviews – that consists in laying eggs before conceiving one's subject."

Father Wieger's exceptional progeny was not lost on the Chinese themselves; who took an interest in his work and let him know as much in writing. A student in Hong Kong wrote him this letter dated 23 April 1932 (a little less than a year before his death):

My Reverend Father, I beg you to excuse me first of all for taking the great liberty of writing to you, but I think that Christian charity will not refuse some information sought by a young student without distinction. Yes, I know you without ever having been introduced to you. I have just read two of your books: *China throughout the Ages* and the *Philosophical Texts*. I was struck with such deep admiration that I would like to possess all of your works and to spend my time studying them. You know not only the face of China but its heart and its roots, and if it has not already done so, France should reserve you a place on its list of great scholars, for you are most certainly among them. For some time I have been looking for *The Canon of Taoism*, *Wisdom of the Daoist Masters* and *Buddhism*, but I have not been able to find them; that is why I humbly ask you to have the kindness to tell me where they are sold; even if the copies are second-hand, I would gladly buy them. If you can do so, send me a catalog in which your books are listed, and I will be very happy."

These few notes sketch only a highly provisional homage to the Father of Sinology. The texts that follow will, like so many *intact tiles and broken jade*, form but a fragile roof to shelter the spirit of Léon Wieger, who chose Ancient China. Father Delattre ended Wieger's obituary with these words: "We would like to picture him arriving at the throne of the Lamb, escorted by the millions of little Chinese souls for whom this priest, doctor, and scholar with his 'little medicine packets' and his books opened the way to baptism and to eternal glory."

For my part, I will not send an umbrella after the rain has fallen (*Yu hou song san* 雨後送傘); these few lines scribbled by Father Wieger himself are enough to bring back the sun:

I must do what others cannot. Even the Fathers themselves cannot understand. Therefore – not to let myself be influenced by their opinions and effects.

Scientific works cannot please unbelievers, against whom I am fighting.

In the order of the greatest good, the sermons for the Mission and a novel above all ... with scruples and *omnia practica*.

To go out ... for a party, for a mission ... to keep myself in touch ...

My vocation. Spirit of the Society. Great plans to be examined, whether true or false ... Yes, there is still plenty of ammunition left.



Continue to write ... others won't do it ... retain my mixed position, half outside (for the ministries), half inside (for study), without binding myself by a cure of souls.

I will be booed and hissed; it matters little to this knight of the wooden cross, handy as I am at cutting and thrusting!

*Translated from the French by Jennifer Curtiss Gage.*

## Notes

1. Archivio della Pontificia Università Gregoriana, vol. 292, 214.
2. Father Léon Wieger's work was widely known and admired during his lifetime. But since the 1950s, although his work on China remains an essential tool for Sinologists, both his life and his writings have been largely ignored. Until the day when a more substantial homage to him appears, I hope that the present historical sketch will rescue this great Sinologist from oblivion.
3. This account is from the Chinese philosopher Li Chih (1527-1602).
4. See *Le Palais de mémoire de Matteo Ricci*, a study of mnemonics written by the Jesuit and republished by Payot in 1986.
5. P. Brucker, S. J., *La Compagnie de Jésus, 1521-1773*, Paris, 1919.
6. J. Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures*, trans. Janet Lloyd, Cambridge, 1985.
7. Cited by Paul Pelliot, *Les Influences européennes sur l'art chinois au XVIIe et au XVIIIe siècle* (Imprimerie nationale, 1927).
8. The Lazarist missionary T. Pedrini, born in Rome in 1671, was presented to the Emperor Kang Xi in 1710 and was assigned the task of maintaining the instruments and building new ones (spinets, harpsichords, guitars). There remains an organ that was moved in approximately 1880 to the old Jesuit church in the Forbidden City. Pedrini died in Beijing in 1746 after having lived for over thirty years in the Forbidden City. His legacy as a composer includes twelve "Sino-Italian sonatas" (opus 3) that were rediscovered in 1934. He is also thought to have written cantatas that are conserved in the Beijing Archives.
9. Jean Lacouture, *Jésuites, une multibiographie*, vol. 1, *Les Conquêteurs*, Paris, 1991.
10. Missions des Jésuites de France, *Chine, Ceylan, Madagascar, 1931-32*.
11. *Feng Shui* 風水, "wind and water," a form of geomancy that studies propitious sites for building cities, houses and tombs.
12. The second Chinese rites controversy would not have time to break out. The questions that Wieger asks are the same as those that were debated in the eighteenth century. The Chinese had indeed observed an eclipse coinciding with the period during which the Flood took place. Rome was highly embarrassed by these antediluvian beings and claimed that its astronomy was superior to that of the Chinese (whence Father Ricci's demonstrations before the Emperor). However, Father Gaubil calculated that the eclipse had taken place

in 2220 B.C., Father Fréret in 2154, and Father Amiot in 2155. It was thus necessary and reasonable to suppose that the Chinese had come into being significantly earlier than 2220.

13. The same pattern was to recur in the 1980s and 1990s; Confucius was rehabilitated and his name used indiscriminately as an ingredient in a series of editorial recipes whose taste and secrecy stimulate the appetite as much as a hundred-year egg.
14. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Novissima Sinica* (1697/99) and *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese* (1716), both contained in *Writings on China*, trans. Daniel J. Cook and Henry Rosemont, Jr., Chicago, 1994.
15. Etiemble, *L'Europe chinoise*, Paris, 1988, vol. 2, p. 256.
16. *Xian sheng* 先生, "born first," or "gentleman."
17. *Missions des Jésuites de France, Chine, Ceylan, Madagascar 1911*.
18. Li Pai 李白 (701-762) was one of the greatest poets of the Tang dynasty.
19. The Ming dynasty 明 lasted from 1368 to 1644.