AOSIS

The propagation paths of the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity in the Ming and Qing dynasties

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Author:
Xianyue He[1]

Affiliation:
[1]School of Marxism, Chengdu University, Chengdu, China

Corresponding author:
Xianyue He,
hexianyue@cdu.edu.cn

According to historical analysis and textual interpretation, the propagation of the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity in the Ming and Qing dynasties was closely related to Matteo Ricci. When entering China, Ricci put forward the 'Theory of Buddhist-Daoist Plagiarism', asserting that Buddhism and Taoism had plagiarised the Catholic doctrine on the triune God. As for Confucianism, he pointed out that the ancient Confucian classics did not contain the doctrine of the Trinity, which he attributed to various facters, leading to what may be termed the 'Confucian Absence Theory'. Matteo Ricci's interpretations and propositions regarding the Chinese Trinity paved the way for the 'Yi-Fo School', the 'Bu-Ru School' and the Figurism, which emerged during the dissemination of the Trinity in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The 'Yi-Fo School' advocated replacing the Buddhist Trinity with the Catholic Trinity to complement the perceived absence in Confucianism, thus forming the 'Bu-Ru School'. In contrast, Figurism advocated for use of Chinese characters and texts as clues to uncover the missing Trinity in Confucian classics. Regarding Matteo Ricci's viewpoints and the above three paths, Buddhism of that era believed that Catholicism had plagiarised the Buddhist doctrine of the Trinity, and modern Chinese scholars also argued that the views of the Figurism were overly far-fetched. These paths placed the Trinitarian doctrines of Catholicism, Buddhism and Daoism in a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparative framework, underscoring the methodological significance of exchanges and mutual learning among civilisations.

Contribution: This article examines the nexus between Matteo Ricci and the propagation of the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity in the Ming and Qing dynasties. It also investigates the evolution of three distinct pathway for this doctrinal propagation and assesses the Chinese Populace's reactions, as well as the interplay of their discourses.

Keywords: Trinity; Matteo Ricci; propagation path; Catholic Church in Ming and Qing dynasties; Buddhism; theory of Buddhist-Daoist plagiarism; Confucian absence theory; Figurism.

Introduction

The propagation of Catholicism in China during the Ming and Qing dynasties was influenced by the phased principle established by Francisco Xavier (1506-1552), which emphasized a gradual introduction of core tenets, such as the existence of a Creator and the immortality of the soul, at the initial stage. It was only after these concepts were assimilated by the Chinese populace that the Church proceeded to teach the more complex doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation (cf. Qi 2014:320–322). Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), the earliest Jesuit to enter inland China, belonged to the first stage of his activities. Therefore, apart from a very brief explanation of the Trinity found in the *Shengjing Yuelu* [圣经约录] [Excerpts from the Holy Bible, 1605], Matteo Ricci did not offer any specific translation of the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity. It was not until after Ricci's death that the Chinese concept of '*Sanwei Yiti* [三位一体]' [three Persons, one Substance] emerged (cf. He 2017). Nevertheless, Ricci's theories, such as the 'Theory of Buddhist-Daoist Plagiarism', which suggested that Buddhism and Taoism had plagiarised the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity, and the 'Confucian Absence Theory', which argued that the existing Confucian classics lacked relevant descriptions of the Holy Trinity, laid the groundwork for the *Yi-Fo* [易佛] School, the *Bu-Ru* [补儒] School and the Figurism.[1] These intertwined theories of Plagiarism and Absence paved the way for the subsequent propagation of the doctrine of the Trinity, and standardised the methods of its dissemination. At the same time, the theories and the paths were also criticized by Buddhism and others.

1.The idea of the division between the Yi-Fo school and the Bu-Ru school came from Xu Guangqi (1562–1633), one of the three pillars of the Chinese Catholic Church, who commented on Catholicism: 'I have said that its teachings can certainly supplement Confucianism and replaced Buddhism [余尝谓其教必可以补儒易佛]' (Xu 1965:1506). Nicolas Trigault had a similar record, 'Ciue, Fo, Pu, Giu' (Ricci & Trigault 1953:448). This idea illustrated the function of Catholicism in China and also outlined two pathways for its spread in China, but it is not found in Matteo Ricci's original Italian work *Fonti Ricciane*. However, there is a difference in the statements between Xu and Trigault.

The replacism to Buddhism

Matteo Ricci strongly asserted that both Buddhism and Taoism were influenced by Catholicism and plagiarised the doctrine of the Trinity. Regarding Buddhism, Ricci initially observed that 'This philosophy seems not only to have borrowed from the West but to have actually caught a glimpse of light from the Christian Gospels. The doctrine of this second sect mentions a certain trinity in which three different gods are fused into one deity, and it teaches reward for the good in heaven and punishment for the wicked in hell'.[2] The phrase 'this second sect' in the citation refers to Buddhism. In other words, Buddhism borrowed elements from Catholicism, particularly the doctrine of the Trinity. Ricci further argued that Taoism also borrowed elements from Catholicism. He stated:

> In addition to the Supreme Deity, this sect has fashioned three other gods, one of whom is Lauzu, himself, the founder of the faith. Thus we have the two sects, each in its own way fashioning a trinity of gods, so that it would seem as if the original parent of falsehood, the father of lies, has not as yet put aside his ambitious desire of divine similitude.[3]

Ricci's point was that both Buddhism and Taoism plagiarised the doctrine of the Trinity from Catholicism, although he did not explicitly specify which concepts and doctrines in these religions originated from plagiarism.

Yang Tingyun [杨廷筠] (1562–1627), a Confucian Christian, is known as one of the three pillars of the Chinese Catholic Church. Before he became a Christian, Yang was deeply influenced by Buddhism. Standaert believed that he 'was quite preoccupied with Buddhism' and 'was surrounded by Buddhist monks' (cf. Standaert 1988:52). After his conversion, nevertheless, Yang adopted Matteo Ricci's viewpoint and explicitly argued that the *Sanshi Fo* [三世佛] [three Buddhas of the three Times] in Buddhism and the *Sanzun* [三尊] [three Lords of Heaven] in Taoism '*Yibang* [依傍]' [imitated] the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity (cf. Yang 2009:454). Yang acknowledged that although the *Sanshi Fo* [三世佛] and the Holy Trinity shared surface similarities, they differed fundamentally. He posited that Buddhists may have heard of the Holy Trinity in Catholicism, but their understanding of it was limited, leading them to take the *Sanshi Fo* [三世佛] in the past, present and future as the Holy Trinity (cf. Yang 1966: 320–324). Obviously, for Yang, the practice of taking the *Sanshi Fo* [三世佛] as the Holy Trinity mimicked the idea but distorted the true doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Yang further critiqued the numerous *Mingxiang* [名相] [names and appearances] of the *Sanshen Fo* [三身佛] with *Fashen* [法身]**,** *Baoshen* [报身] and *Huashen* [化身] [Three Buddhas of Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya, and Nirmanakaya], as they too imitated and distorted the authentic meaning of the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity, albeit in a more sophisticated manner than the *Sanshi Fo* [三世佛] (cf. Yang 1966:324–325). Yang's understanding of the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity is relatively simple and incomplete,

which heavily relies on the works of Alfonso Vagnone [王丰肃] (1566–1640) and Diego De Pantoja [庞迪我] (1571–1618), and his views on the *Sanshi Fo* [三世佛] and the *Sanshen Fo* [三身佛] are somewhat superficial. Nevertheless, from the perspective of history and literature, Yang's analyses provide a substantial comparative study between the *Sanshen Fo* [三身佛] and the Catholic Trinity, which has pioneering significance in the historical and literary intersection of Chinese and Western trinitarian doctrines in the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

Contrary to the views of Matteo Ricci and Yang Tingyun, Shi Jiji [释寂基], a Buddhist monk, maintained from a Buddhist standpoint that the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity was derived from Diego de Pantoja's plagiarism and distortion of the Buddhist concept *Yixing Sanshen* [一性三身] [one nature and three bodies of Buddhism] following Ricci's death and then interpreted the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity through the internal structure and the discourse pattern of the *Sanshen Fo* [三身佛]. According to Shi, the Pure Dharmakaya represents the nature, and the Perfectly Completed Sambhogakaya with everything sufficient represents the action, and the Thousand Hundred Millions of Nirmanakaya that empathises with everything represents function. The nature is regarded as the substance, while the action is considered the function. Consequently, the internal relationship of the *Sanshen Fo* [三身佛] is seen as the relationship between substance and function (cf. Shi 2013:2002-2004). The difference between the viewpoints of the 'thousand hundred millions of Nirmanakaya' in Buddhism and the 'only one second person of the Holy Trinity' in Catholicism reflects the fundamental difference and opposition between these two trinitarian theories. Therefore, Yang Tingyun was notably perplexed by the complicated *Mingxiang* [名相] of the *Sanshen Fo* [三身佛]. Shi Jiji's theory on substance-function may be regarded as the earliest attempt to interpret and sinicize the Catholic Trinity utilizing Buddhist concepts and terminologies.

The mutual allegations of plagiarism between Catholicism and Buddhism demonstrate a resemblance in their trinitarian doctrines. Taoism, for various reasons, refrained from directly addressing the accusations made by Matteo Ricci and Yang Tingyun. However, Zhu Xi [朱熹] (1130–1200), a philosopher during the Song Dynasty, argued that Taoism's *Sanqing* [三清] [Three Purities] were borrowed from Buddhism's *Sanshen Fo* [三身佛] (cf. Zhu 1988:3005–3006). Contemporary Taoist scholar Qing Xitai (1927–2017) criticised Zhu Xi's viewpoint and pointed out that the Taoist *Sanqing* [三清] have independent origins (cf. Qing 2008: 24–34). Matteo Ricci's theory of plagiarism, therefore, implicated all three religions within the historical context of the comparative trinitarian theories.

The 'Theory of Buddhist-Daoist Plagiarism' also involves a return to the original teachings of Catholicism, and a replacement of the trinities of Buddhism and Taoism with the Catholic Trinity. This replacement of the trinities serves as the foundation for the theoretical framework of the 'Yi-Fo School'.

2.Cf. Ricci and Trigault (1953:99). For the original Italian texts, see Ricci (1942:123–124).

3.Cf. Ricci and Trigault (1953:102). For the original Italian texts, see Ricci (1942:128).

The Bu-Ru School and Figurism

In contrary to Buddhism and Taoism, the Confucian classics do not contain the contents of the Trinity, as well as to heaven and hell. This discrepancy has sparked debate over the absence of the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity in Confucian classics. 'Why has there been no words of the doctrine in the classics?' As stated by Yan Mo [严谟], a Confucian Christian during the early Qing Dynasty:

> Someone said: God is self-existence without beginning, the subject of God has the mystery of the Trinity, and God is responsible for the creation of heaven, earth, deities, human beings, and all things. Hence, why has there been no words of the doctrine in the Confucian classics? (cf. Yan 1966:84)

Similarly, *Tianzhu Shiyi* [天主实义] [The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven] recorded the lack of the doctrines of the Trinity:

> The Chinese scholar says: Confucians regard the sages as authoritative examples [*for the rest of mankind*], and the sages used the canonical writings and their authoritative commentaries as media of instruction; but in all our canonical writings and their authoritative commentaries there is not a single mention of heaven and hell. Are you trying to say that the sages were ignorant of this teaching? Why is it concealed and not mentioned? (cf. Ricci 2016:267, 269)

The question arises as to why the Chinese sages chose to conceal the teachings of the Trinity without writing them out? In response to this issue, Matteo Ricci (2016) offered his perspective:

> The teaching handed down from the sages was geared to what people were capable of accepting; thus, there are many teachings, which, though handed down for generations, are incomplete. Then there are teachings that were given direct to students and were not recorded in books or, if recorded, were subsequently lost. There is also the possibility that later, perverse historians removed parts of these records because they did not believe in their historical veracity. Moreover, written records are frequently subject to alteration, and one cannot say that because there are no written record certain things did not happen. (cf. p. 269)

According to Matteo Ricci, it was because of various reasons that the existing Confucian classics missed the relevant descriptions of the Holy Trinity. Li Zhizao [李之藻] (1565–1630), a Confucian Christian, believed that the absence was caused by Qin Shihuang's [秦始皇] burning book and burying Confucian scholars alive (cf. Li 2001:510). Yan Mo contended that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity was inexpressible and inaudible prior to Jesus' birth, a subject seldom broached by Confucius. He justified the absence in Confucian classics, suggesting that its discussion at an inopportune time could actually result in misinterpretations of the Holy Trinity. Consequently, the 'absence' of the Trinity in Confucian texts was due to its premature timing, before Jesus' birth, which precluded its documentation in these classics (cf. Yan 1966:84–87).

Matteo Ricci's theory on the absence of the Trinity in Confucianism served as the foundation for the introduction of the concept in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Initially, missionaries recognised the absence of this doctrine in Confucianism and sought to complement it by translating and disseminating the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity from western languages into Chinese. The works of Alfonso Vagnone, Diego De Pantoja and others on the doctrine of the Trinity in Chinese are collectively known as the 'Bu-Ru School', or the 'School of Translating'. Subsequently, Ricci's concept of the 'Absence' raised the question of whether this absence was a complete and thorough, with no tace, or partial, with some traces remaining. Matteo Ricci and Li Zhizao were not concerned about the presence of traces. Nevertheless, the French Figurists and Yan Mo believed in Matteo Ricci's theory and sought to identify any potential traces, especially within Chinese texts and characters. Therefore, both the Bu-Ru School and the Figurism originated from Matteo Ricci's Theory of Confucian Absence.

Bu-Ru School

Matteo Ricci, in his *Shengjing Yuelu* [圣经约录] proposed the characters *Sanwei* [三位] to illustrate the concept of the 'three persons of *Tianzhu* [天主]' within the Catholic Trinity , yet did not elaborate further. In 1615, Alfonso Vagnone penned *Jiaoyao Jielue* [教要解略] [Essential Teachings of the Church Briefly Explained], offering a detailed explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Within this text, only the Chinese characters '*Yiti Sanwei* [一体三位]' [one Substance, three Persons] were used to translate the term 'trinity', and '*Shengshen* [圣神]' was first referred to the third person, also known as the Holy Spirit, 'and *si bi li duo san duo* [斯彼利多三多], is the *Shengshen* [圣神] [Holy Spirit] and also the third person'. The book also provides two examples to help illustrate the relationship between '*Yiti* [一体]' and '*Sanwei* [三位]', namely, 'although person is divided into three , the entity is truly unique [位虽分三,体实唯一]', and 'one is three，three is one also [一而三,三而一者也]'. The first example is that a soul, although divided into three different functions of memory, understanding and will, is still a singular entity. Another example is that although spring, river and lake are different in forms, 'their water is connected as one unity [其水实惟一而已]' (cf. Vagnone 2002:211–214).

Diego De Pantoja, in his work, provided an explanation of the plurality and unity of the three persons of the Trinity (cf. De [庞迪我] Pantoja 2002:34–45). It was Pantoja who first used the Chinese characters '*Sanwei Yiti* [三位一体]' to refer to the term 'Trinity' (cf. De [庞迪我] Pantoja 1966:156), a translation that gradually became widely accepted. Among the distinguished contributors to this discourse was Louis Buglio [利类思] (1606–1682), an Italian Jesuit, who translated the book *Chaoxing Xueyao* [超性学要] [Essential Studies about the Transcendental Nature]. This work primarily focused on the part about the Trinity in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. Buglio's translation is regarded as the apex of the translation of Aristotelian philosophy's adaptation and the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity's articulation (cf. Xiao 2018).

Overall, the efforts to complement Confucianism with Catholic teachings exhibited remarkable internal consistency. They inherited concepts and textual expressions successively,

and eventually established a series of translations for the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity, including '*Sanwei Yiti* [三位一体]', '*Shengshen* [圣神]' and '*Sanyi* [三一]', which continue to exert influence in the present day.

Figurism

Figurism's origins could be traced back to Matteo Ricci's accommodation approach (cf. Wei 2020:10), and it could also be traced back to his 'Confucian Absence Theory'. Matteo Ricci once asserted that the Confucian classics were devoid of any mention of the Holy Trinity. The main efforts of the Figurists, including Joachim Bouvet [白晋] (1656–1730), Jean François Foucquet [傅圣泽] (1665–1741) and Joseph de Prémare [马若瑟] (1666–1736), were dedicated to search for any traces left of this 'absent' part. Their primary investigative method of 'searching for' was Matteo Ricci's hermeneutics, which involved interpreting certain texts or words in Chinese classics in light of the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity. They believed that the implied meaning in these texts or words symbolized the Trinity. For example, the phrase 'The Tao produced One, One produced Two, Two produced Three [道生一, 一生二, 二生三]' in the *Tao Te Ching* [道德经] was interpreted as referring to the Trinity (cf. Zhuo 1998).

In his Chinese book *Gujin Jingtian Jian* [古今敬天鉴] [An examination of the ancient and modern (Chinese) worship of Heaven: the essentials of the Heavenly Teaching], Joachim Bouvet also provided one interpretation of the text in the *Shijing* [诗经] [Book of Songs]. He argued that the phrase 'Three Empresses in Heaven [三后在天]' in the *Shijing* 'Daya' [诗经·大雅] [Book of Songs (with reference to) 'Great Pleasure'] alludes to the triune God in Heaven. Similarly, he suggested that the phrase '*Erhou* [二后] accepted the issued order [二后受之]' in the *Shijing* 'Zhousong' [诗经·周颂] [Book of Songs (with reference to) 'Odes in Zhou'] as a reference to the second person of the Trinity, the Holy Son. In addition, Joachim Bouvet believed that the '*Tai Yi* [太一] Contains Three [太一含三]' recorded in *Shiji* 'Fengshanshu' [史记·封禅书] [Records of the Historian (with reference to) 'The treatise on the Feng and Shan sacrifices'] also referred to the Trinity (cf. Liu 2005:272–274). In another Chinese manuscript *Yi Yin* [易引] [Introduction to *Yi*] Joachim Bouvet even used *Sanji Sancai Zhi Tu* [三极三才之图] [chart of three poles and three elements] to illustrate the Trinity (cf. Wei 2020:37).

Structurally, the Figurists believed that certain Chinese characters also embodied the essence of the Trinity, such as characters '*San* [三]', '*Yan* [言]', '*Tian* [天]' and so on:

- [三] *san*, three (three times one), Trinity.
- [言] *yan*, word, consisting of [口] mouth and [二] two: the second person of the Trinity, the logos, comes forth from the mouth of the Father (cf. Jesus Sirach, 24:3).
- [天] *tian*, Heaven, consisting of [二] two and [人] human being: the second person of the Trinity.
- [婪] *lan*, greedy, consisting of two trees [木] with a woman [女] below: reference to Eve's sin.

- [古] *gu*, old, consisting of [十] ten, and [口] mouth: the doctrine was orally transmitted from the tenth patriarch in the Old Testament, that is *Yao* or Noah.
- [船] *chuan*, ship, consisting of [八] eight, [口] mouth and [舟] ship: a ship with eight mouths or persons: that is. the ark with Noah, his three sons and their wives (cf. ed. Standaert 2001:675).

François Foucquet, examining the semantic of Chinese characters, believed the *Yi* [易] [change] is a mysterious name of Jesus Christ, the sun the image of the Word and the moon the figure of the adorable soul (cf. Witeck 1982:155–156).

Yan Mo, in concurrence with the Jesuits, argued that the '*Hansan Weiyi* [函三为一]' [encompassing the Three in One] and the '*Sanyi* [三一]' sacrifices in the Han Dynasty, which symbolised the doctrine of a certain Trinity, were equivalent to the Holy Trinity (cf. Yan 1966:87). However, the interpretations by the Figurists have been criticised for being speculative and overly exaggerated (cf. Zhuo 1998).

Conclusion

Matteo Ricci's 'Theory of Buddhist-Daoist Plagiarism' and 'Confucian Absence Theory' outlined three paths for the propagation of the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Among these, the Bu-Ru School exerted the most significant influence, shaping the fundamental concepts, the discourse structure and system of the Trinity, ultimately forming the belief in non-hierarchical and non-sequential nature of the three persons, who, while distinct, share a common essence and substance. As a result, the concept of *Sanwei Yiti* [三位一体] also became widely accepted. The Chinese terminology and the discourse system of the Protestant doctrine of the Trinity, introduced to China in the late Qing Dynasty, originated from the efforts of the Bu-Ru School during this period. While Protestantism has utilised the term '*Shengling* [圣灵]' [Holy Spirit] to distinguish itself from Catholicism's '*Shengshen* [圣神]', it should be noted that the Jesuits once used '*Shengling* [圣灵]' but later abandoned it under Alfonso Vagnone. Outside the churches, there exist numerous imitative expressions like '*Siwei Yiti* [四位一体]' and '*Wuwei Yiti* [五位一体]' in contemporary Chinese, indicating their richness and impact on Chinese vocabulary. Despite Catholicism's earlier introduction to Japan and the existence of catechisms such as *Byōbu Monjo* [屏風文書] [Documents in a Folding Screen at Evora in Portugal], but Japan did not develop an independent terminology or discourse system for the Trinity. Its concepts such as '*Sanmiittai* [三位一体]' [Trinity] and '*Seirei* [聖靈]' [Holy Spirit] are still attributed to the Bu-Ru school (cf. Ebisawa & Matsuda 1963).

The Bu-Ru School and the Theory of Buddhist-Daoist Plagiarism were intertwined from their inception. The Bu-Ru School adopted the concepts and discourse models of the Trinity in Buddhism and Taoism, such as '*Yiti* [一体]', 'One is Three, Three is One'. However, on core issues of cultural identity, it strove to differentiate itself from

Buddhism and Taoism, for example, by employing the original term '*Sanwei Yiti* [三位一体]' in contrast to '*Yixing Sanshen* [一性三身]' and '*Yiqi Sanqing* [一气三清]'. While it eventually carved out a distinct cultural identity through ongoing development, the Bu-Ru School still could not completely distinguish itself from the two religions of Buddhism and Taoism. For example, the terms such as '*Sanyi* [三一]' and '*Shengshen* [圣神]' originated from Buddhism and Taoism, and even '*Sanwei Yiti* [三位一体]' can be seen in Buddhist scriptures. Or it can be said that the basic terminology of the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity borrowed from the Buddhism and Taoism.

It is noteworthy that Joachim Bouvet, the founder of Figurism, arrived in China much later than Matteo Ricci, in 1687. Nevertheless, the Figurism was intertwined with the Bu-Ru School and the Theory of Buddhist-Daoist Plagiarism. In addition to interpreting the doctrine of the Trinity in the Taoist *Tao Te Ching* [道德经] and *Yi Ching* [易经] [the Book of Changes], the Figurists accepted Matteo Ricci's view that '*Tianzhu* [天主] is *Shangdi* [上帝], but the two are actually the same entity with different names', but did not pay attention to the internal interpretive process of Ricci's 'Confucian Absence Theory'. The complete discovery of the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity within Chinese classics, as well as the fulfillment of the 'absence' by Confucianism itself rather than western translation, would lead to Matteo Ricci's notion of *Shangdi* [上帝] to shift from an invention to a discovery, and from a construction to a manifestation. Consequently, this shift could diminish the missionary significance in China (cf. He 2019). That is to say, if Confucianism already contained the doctrine of the Trinity, would it still be necessary for Matteo Ricci to introduce the Trinity to China? The activities of Figurists have actually formed a paradox: without discovering traces, their activities are meaningless; discovering traces, it is unnecessary to preach in China and the activities of the entire missionary are meaningless. As a result, Figurism has been criticized not only in China but also in Europe. Therefore, both Matteo Ricci and the Figurism could be labeled as part of the 'Bu-Ru School', but their essence and outcomes were markedly different. The former uses Catholic Trinity to supplement Confucianism, and the latter is Confucianism with his own Trinity.

Overall, Matteo Ricci's theories are fundamentally aimed at preaching in China and led to the three distinct propagation paths. However, at the cognitive level, they are more one-sided and superficial, and they has conflicts with Chinese traditional culture at the practical level. Both Buddhism and Taoism have long histories and ancient origins, and in view of the isolation of traffic in history, plagiarism is unlikely; Ricci's viewpoints are more subjective and arbitrary without examining the histories of Buddhism and Taoism. Whether Confucianism needs the doctrine of the Trinity as a 'complement', Ricci did not provide theoretical or logical arguments, and therefore lacked persuasiveness. Although they attracted a few populace to join the church, they did not meet the spiritual needs of the vast majority of Chinese populace, nor did they resonate with them, and did not achieve the purpose envisaged by Matteo Ricci.

Acknowledgements

Author's contributions

H.X. declares that they are the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by any of the authors.

Data availability

Data sharing does not apply to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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