

Searching into the History of Christianity in China The Ricci 21st Century Roundtable

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1. INTRODUCTION: FAR AWAY AND LONG AGO

The Ricci 21st century Roundtable on the History of Christianity in China is one of the pioneer projects in the field of sharing scholarly data over the internet and making it available to both the specialist and the amateur. The Roundtable project began in 1996, when Rev. Edward Malatesta, S.J. (founding director of the Ricci Institute) imagined a 'magic tool' that would allow people in different parts of the world – especially in China – to access information and share what they knew about the history of Christianity in China. That magic tool turned out to be the internet, and soon the Ricci 21st Century Roundtable was born.

The Roundtable Database was planned as a repository of data *on* resources regarding Christianity in China (the ARCHIVES category), *about* the history of Christianity in China (the BIOGRAPHIES, BIBLIOGRAPHIES, IMAGES and SOUNDS categories, containing both primary and secondary sources), and *about* the development of studies of contemporary Christianity in China (the DIRECTORY and, at least in part, the LOCATIONS/INSTITUTIONS categories). For the Roundtable purposes, 'China' was defined as a geographical region including Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao. The time limit was not defined, nor was the content strictly limited: from Nestorian Christians to American missionaries, from Court Jesuits to non-religious personnel of missionary hospitals and schools - everything was to become part of the project.

The fact that the project was based on the internet allowed scholars to both access and contribute data from virtually anywhere. A worldwide network of institutions and scholars would input directly into the Roundtable Database information in their possession related to Christianity in China, with the Ricci Institute in San Francisco acting as coordinator of the project in both technical and editorial/quality-control aspects. *Open Minded Solutions*, a company specialized in applications for the

internet, began to develop software that would allow data entry through the internet from different geographical locations and in different languages. Each new entry was immediately visible in a reserved part of the website (the password-protected Authors' and Administrators' section), and then posted to the public area once the Ricci Institute had approved it.

The first inputting stations were in China: *Fujian Shifan Daxue*, *Huaxi Yike* and *Huazhong Shifan Daxue* began inputting data from their archives in 1997, and contacts were established with other potential stations, mainly in Europe. During the first three years of the project, internet technology was evolving very fast in certain areas (e.g., control, display and searchability of data), but very slowly in others (e.g., the display of double-byte characters such as Chinese characters). The criteria used to select and input such a vast amount of material had to be shaped through trial and error, while agreements with other inputting stations had to be negotiated and training provided. Most of all, we had to solve existing problems when they arose, but leaving the door open to future technological innovations that would possibly get around them (as duly happened with, for example, Unicode). *Moving target* and *work in progress* are the words most often used to describe the Roundtable project, and finding a good balance between the work that needs to be done now and the wonders that might solve all our problems in a near or far away future is indeed the most difficult part of it.

At the beginning of 1999 the time was ripe for a new release of the Roundtable. The material we had been gathering for two years had given us a clearer idea of what we wanted to display on the web and how to display it, what we needed as far as the search engine and the organization of entries were concerned, and what was a good length for each entry. Together with Jonathan Hazlett, who originally designed the Roundtable lay-out, we embarked on a major technical upgrade that would make all the new features we had in mind possible. The first release of the upgrade was ready at the end of October 1999, and the complete release is scheduled for the summer 2000. The changes made affected both the 'static' and the 'dynamic' sides of the Roundtable, and these will be discussed in details below.

2. THE STATIC SITE

The static site, so called because it consists of hard-coded pages, has been considerably expanded from the previous version in order to give an historical and methodological framework to the Roundtable project and to facilitate its use from a

technical viewpoint (for example, how to display Chinese or search in Chinese). It also contains information of value to potential users, such as news about conferences, exhibits and new publications in the field (loosely defined) of Christianity and China, as well as resources for scholars, such as fellowships, scholarships and courses.

The added value of an internet-based project such as the Roundtable is that it can become a resource for a diverse audience. The internet provides a way to organize and save information that allows us to construct a hierarchical model of information storage, which will make the Roundtable useful for both the specialist and the non-specialist. Currently, the Roundtable is used mainly by graduate students and scholars who have a good knowledge of the topic, but often do not have access to specific works or information. The aim is to develop the static part of the website so that it can become a ‘companion’ to non-specialists – students, amateurs, people simply curious of knowing more about this piece of history – and a powerful tool for researching primary sources of interest to specialists.

3. THE DYNAMIC SITE

There are currently 5 categories accessible in the Roundtable: ARCHIVES, BIOGRAPHIES, BIBLIOGRAPHIES, DIRECTORY and LOCATIONS. After a brief description of each category’s particular characteristics, we will discuss more in general the features they share.

3.1 Archives

This category is a guide to archival resources on Christianity in China. Archives, libraries, and institutions that have agreed to share information about their holdings are listed according to their Country, State/Province, and City. For archives located in the United States, the complete 1989 edition of *Christianity in China: A Scholars' Guide to Resources in the Libraries and Archives of the United States* by Archie R. Crouch has been input. A typical entry will include basic practical information and background about the institution and a list of its holdings, divided into general holdings (manuscripts, pamphlets, audio-visual, correspondence, serials, dissertations, maps, etc.) and special collections. It is also possible to view the data organized by ‘dissertations’, ‘oral histories’, ‘persons’, ‘serials’, ‘subjects’, and these listings combine the information from all the institutions. The following is a typical archival entry:

ST. JOSEPH CONVENT

Sisters of St. Joseph Archives

Baden PA 15005
phone: (412) 869-2151
Sister Helen Marie Shrift, C.S.J., Archivist

restrictions: Access by appointment.

background: The Sisters of St. Joseph was founded in France around 1650. The Sisters of St. Joseph of Pittsburgh was founded at Ebensburg, Pennsylvania, in 1869, and moved to Baden in 1901. In 1926, the Passionist Fathers requested assistance for their missionary work in China. Sisters of St. Joseph were sent to China from 1926 to 1948, to work in the areas of Shenchow and Chihkiang (Yuanchow) in Hunan. The collection is not fully processed. See also Congregation of the Passion of the Eastern United States (Passionists), Mother of Sorrows Retreat House, West Springfield, MA, 01089.

GENERAL HOLDINGS

correspondence: Letters to and from sisters, including correspondence with Superiors, 1925-48.

manuscripts: "Events and Places in China," by the sisters in China.

pamphlets: New Bamboo Shoots, by Msgr. Eugene E. Fahy, S.J., 1954 (a collection of reprints of articles from Sign magazine, published from 1926 to 1948).

diaries: Diary by Sr. Clarissa Stattmiller, 1927, who died of malaria in July of that year.

memorabilia: 6 scrapbooks containing unpublished narratives, articles from Sign magazine, news clippings, and letters.

audio-visual: 3 photo albums of areas in China where the sisters worked and traveled, including photos of Chinese people.

serials: The Little Design in China, 1946-49.

Although ARCHIVES can be easily browsed either by selecting the geographical location (country, state, city) and then the institution, or by selecting the different indices, it is mainly *search-based*, allowing a full document search or a context sensitive search. Our initial assumption was that a scholar may want to find out which institution(s) hold information about a specific topic, or place, or person,

rather than simply to browse the list of contents. ARCHIVES will be brought up to the standards of the other categories in the course of this year, with expanded search capabilities and improved hypertext links within the category. Archival resources of the United States are completely covered in this section, and they will be updated both content-wise and for organization/display purposes. A first draft of basic Chinese institutions is currently being created, and will be followed by coverage of European archives.

3.2 Biographies

The entries collected under this category are biographies of individuals – missionaries, teachers, doctors, converts, critics and so on - who have played a role in the history of Christianity in China. Entries are not intended to be exhaustive but to provide a useful foundation for further research, especially for those whose backgrounds are not well documented. BIOGRAPHIES works as our authority file: it is where standards to be used throughout the Roundtable are set regarding names (following the Library of Congress format, especially for Western names, or the most commonly used form) religious affiliation and places. The category is organized around four ‘fixed fields’ (*Name, Alternative Names, Religious Affiliation* and *Image*) and one ‘free text field’ for the information. Names are filed alphabetically, with Chinese names filed according to pinyin transcription. Pen-names or variations – such as Chinese names for Westerners, or Western names for Chinese - are listed under *Alternative Names*. Again, the search function is fundamental, and searches can be targeted at specific fields or at the full-text. The following is a typical biographical entry:

Name:	Almeida, Antonio d', 1556 -1591		
Alternative Names:	de Almeyda ; Mai Andong; Lixiu		
Religious Affiliation:	Roman Catholic (Society of Jesus)		
Born:	1556	or	1557
Died: October 17, 1591			
<i>Source: Dehergne, Répertoire (1973)</i>			
Almeida	(Almeyda),	António	de (port.) P.
Mei	Ngan-tong	Li-Sieou	(Pf.).
N. 1557, Trancoso, près de Vizeu -E. 4 janv. 1576 (Lus. 43 II, 509v.)			
Emb. 10 avril 1584, non prêtre, sur le <i>Relíquias</i> (W 254).			
A. Macao 31 juill. 1585; en part pour Canton, 8 oct. 1585; du 23 janv. 1586 à juillet, à "Ciquione" (Shaoshing, Chao-hing), Tchö-kiang; retour à Macao; août 1588 à août 1589, "Sciaochina" (Shiuhing, Tchao-k'ing),			

Kwangtung; 1589, résidence de "Sciaceo" (Shiuchow, Chao-tcheou), même province; malade, rentre à Macao, fin de 1590 à sept. 1591, où il revient à Shiuchow.
 P. 25 mars 1585, Goa (D'ELIA I, 224; RBS no. 310)
 M. 17 oct. 1591, Shiuchow (Pf.) (en déc. 1591, écrits JS 11 II, 271.
 Pf. 42; DHGE (E. M. RIVIERE); AnG 602; SCHÜTTE, 874; STREIT IV, 1979.

One of the objectives of the Roundtable is to facilitate access to original sources that are not under copyright law, or whose copyrights have been granted to the Ricci Institute, and many biographical entries are taken directly from primary sources such as Joseph Dehergne's *Répertoire des jésuites de Chine de 1552 à 1800*. The aim is to include, when available, different biographical recounts from different sources for the same individual. The Ricci Institute editors and the specialists who cooperate with us review each entry and possibly correct factual mistakes – even in the original sources -before approving it for public display. The source of information and the editor(s) are stated at the beginning of each entry, unless the entry is written directly by the Ricci Institute. Moreover, entries are input in the original language – in the case of the above mentioned Dehergne in French – and this leads us to a delicate question we will address later: is the Roundtable, with data in English, Chinese and several European languages, a multilingual site?

3.3 Bibliographies

Entries in this category contain information about books, manuscripts, articles, dissertations, microforms related to the history of Christianity in China. This is the most ‘multilingual’ category in the site, because all the bibliographies are entered in the original languages. English records constitute so far the great majority, but there are an increasing number of Chinese entries (mainly from the archives of our Chinese inputting stations). Records are alphabetically displayed by title, and in the near future it will be possible to sort them by author. When possible, information about books includes the index or the table of contents, and a list of all additional authors, particularly useful information in case of conference proceedings or books edited by several authors. As in BIOGRAPHIES, English keywords are being added to all the entries, so that multilingual records are retrievable through a single search (however, the content of the record is still only in the original language, so the full entries are helpful only if the user knows the language). When an input title is known to be rare, we try to locate the institutions that hold a copy and add the contact information in the description field. The following is a typical bibliographic record:

Title: Avvisi del Giappone de gli anni M.D.LXXXII., LXXXIII. et LXXXI
Author: N/A
Imprint: In Roma, per Francesco Zanetti, 1586.
Language: Italian
Format: Microform

(Description)

188, [2] p.
"Cauati dalle lettere della Compagnia di Giesù. Riceute il mese de dicembre M.D.LXXXV."

"con alcuni altri della Cina dell' LXXXIII. et LXXXIV"
Manuscripta. Microfilms of rare and out of-print books, list 7, no. 22
Rare. Microfilm. St. Louis, Mo. : Pius XII Memorial Library, Saint Louis University, 1959. 1 microfilm reel : 35 mm.
Negative film in Vatican, Biblioteca Vaticana. Microfilm of book in Vatican library

Jesuits Missions China Japan History 16th century

3.4 Institutions, Directory and future categories

INSTITUTIONS is currently organized following the model of BIOGRAPHIES: there are four 'fixed fields' for *Name*, *Alternative Names*, *Type* (of institution) and *Location*, and one 'free text field' for description of the institution and any other additional information. So far, all the entries are taken from directories and atlases of Chinese institutions that were run by missionaries. There are some sending agencies included, typically located in Europe or in the United States, but entries are mainly local schools, hospitals, colleges, orphanages, churches etc. in China.

Since the institutions listed vary greatly, the 'single hierarchy' model:

1st level: list of entries organized by names

2nd level: institution record

is not very satisfactory. We are therefore considering changing it to a 'multi-hierarchy' model such as:

1st level: list of missionary organizations

2nd level: list of institutions associated with the specific missionary organization

3rd level: institution record

or to rebuild the category around a 'map-based' model, which would facilitate immensely the display and understanding of this type of data. Using a 'map-based' model would also allow us to 'transform' LOCATIONS into a new category called PLACES, that would store not only data about single institutions, but also about artificial geographical borders connected with missionary activities (e.g., dioceses for Catholic institutions), areas of activities of the different religious orders, and so on. In the first lay-out of the Roundtable Database, there were two categories for 'geo-related' information: INSTITUTIONS held data about organizations, benevolent societies, hospitals, clinics, publishers and universities with Christian connections, whereas LOCATIONS was dedicated to churches, shrines, cemeteries, monuments and other places of worship. However, we now feel that this division was too artificial, and that often it wasn't clear even to the editors where a specific entry belonged. Moreover, since both categories are connected to geographical places, it soon became clear that it was easier to merge them and 'invent' a new category (PLACES) utilizing a different inputting and displaying organization.

DIRECTORY features a list of individuals interested – for work or for passion – in all aspects of Christianity in China. Each entry displays the contact information of the individual and a short summary of his/her background, research area and interests. With a new feature currently under development (*see Resources, below*) it will be possible to link each entry to the résumé or webpage of the person. Any person interested in being added to the list can email to the Ricci Institute the information they wish to have appear; the next release of the Roundtable Database will feature an on-line form to submit data directly and according to the category's template. Individuals listed are responsible for keeping their information updated and users will be able to contact any of the people listed directly.

4. NEW TRICKS, OLD PROBLEMS

The main result we wanted to achieve in this new release was to produce a site that was simpler to use for both public and editors. In particular, we wanted to eliminate frames, to allow different ways of browsing through the complete list of entries, to simplify the organization of some categories and to improve and upgrade the search functions. Along the way, we realized that we needed to better organize the 'multilingual' aspect of the site, improving the display of different scripts and the

searchability of entries that are input in different languages. Here are our successes and our failures.

4.1 The new tricks

We eliminated the frames and replaced them with an entity that contains the upper part of the page (navigation and search bars) and that is linked to all the html pages. This way, we can combine consistency with speed of loading and the possibility of bookmarking any entry without having to open the entry page in a different frame.

Entries can now be browsed by using 'top to bottom' arrows that allow the display of 25 entries per page. The loading time of the page is much faster than before, when the whole list of entries had to be loaded. It is also possible to use the alphabetic index in the search bar: by clicking on a letter, all the entries that start with that letter will be displayed. We will probably need to break down also this type of display to 25 entries per page, because for categories such as BIBLIOGRAPHIES and BIOGRAPHIES there are too many entries to display per letter, and it can be very slow to load.

After almost three years of data-inputting, the Roundtable Database begins to have a consistent number of entries and we think that users will be more and more interested in looking for specific information, in addition to browsing through all the entries to see what is the general content of the categories. To reflect this shift from 'display-based' categories (i.e. categories built around the idea that entries would be browsed rather than searched) to 'search-based' categories, search functions are now available at the top of each page. Simple searches can be performed from any page of any category, although the search is so far limited to the content of the category where the user is. The simple search will allow the user to search the fixed fields (for example, in BIBLIOGRAPHIES, *Title*, *Author*, *Imprint*, *Language* and *Format*) as well as to perform a full-text search utilizing keywords. For more complex searches, the search bar provides a link to the 'Advanced Search' page, where it is possible to set different search parameters such as 'AND', 'OR', 'Exact Phrase Match', 'Case Sensitive' and so forth.

4.2 The old problems

Although the display of entries has been improved, it is not fully satisfactory yet. It is still not possible to list the entries differently than the default way, i.e. bibliographic entries can be sorted only by *Title* and not, for example, by *Author*, biographies only by *Name* and not by *Religious Order*. This problem can be partially

obviated by searching the parameter the user is interested in seen displayed. For example, searching '*Author: Ricci, Matteo*' in BIBLIOGRAPHIES will list all the bibliographic entries that have Matteo Ricci as author, but this solution is not completely adequate.

Categories such as INSTITUTIONS (and, in the future, PLACES) are not well served by the alphabetical display of entries that suits BIOGRAPHIES, BIBLIOGRAPHIES and DIRECTORY, since their entries contain valuable geographical data, besides information about the specific institutions. These entries would be even more useful if displayed over a map connected with a time-line, because it would be possible to see how they appear and are located in relation to other institutions, making it possible to elaborate more general 'geo-sociological' conclusions. For example, spatial visualization of the location of Protestant missions and how these locations expanded, or shrank, or shifted or remained constant through the years could lead to interesting research on the reciprocal influence between local practices and missionaries' methods.

An issue that is still difficult to solve is that the Roundtable Database was not originally designed as a completely 'cross-referencing' database. Now that we begin to have quite a large amount of data available, being able to follow the thread of particular information throughout the Database (for example, having the biography of Matteo Ricci linked to any bibliographic entry that is related to him, as well as to the archival institutions that hold material about or by him, and to any scholar listed in the Directory who is interested in him) has become more desirable, as has being able to do cross-category searches. Unfortunately, the current organization of the categories on the server's side, and the fact that all the entries are created 'on the fly' rather than being hard-coded, makes it quite complicated to achieve such a result. A first step in this direction has been to link the bibliographic sources of BIOGRAPHIES to the relevant entry (or entries) in BIBLIOGRAPHIES, but this has been done manually (i.e. spelling out the URL of the bibliographic entry within the biographical text) rather than through a 'search-link'. This method is not very reliable, and it is very time consuming, as it requires the editors to scan each entry for possible related information in other categories, find the correct link and add it to the body of the entry.

4.3 The new trick that works like an old problem

‘Once your data is in Unicode, it can be all handled in a uniform way and sorted, searched, and manipulated without fear of data corruption’ (W3c,

'libro', 'livre', 'livro' or 'liber' will not be retrieved. Most of the Chinese entries are input entirely in Chinese (we use *pinyin* romanization for titles, in order to allow a proper alphabetic filing of the entries), therefore the books will have the character *shu* as 'format', and will only be retrieved through a separate search in Chinese. There may be partial solutions to this problem; for example, we are beginning to add English keywords to all the non-English entries when they are being approved. We are also experimenting with the standardization of the fixed fields through the use of pull-down menus in English, quite useful for *Format* and *Language* in BIBLIOGRAPHIES, perhaps for *Religious Order* in BIOGRAPHIES, etc. However, the real question remains: do data in different languages make a site multilingual? Is our site multilingual? My answer is, yes, but only because we have data in several languages and we assume our users to be fluent in at least English and Chinese, or in other obscure or forgotten languages, not because there are tools to overcome the fact that without a good knowledge of English the site can be quite useless. As to what these tools could be, for now, we do not know.

5. CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF THE ROUNDTABLE

After three years of experiments, frustrations, successes, failures, good, bad and very bad ideas, we can draw some lessons on what to do and what to avoid in our project. The Roundtable priorities are now being reorganized in order to give the user the choice about what to see and how, whether to search or to browse, whether to use the information as a quick reference tool or as a starting point for more in-depth research. A tool that will significantly expand the 'field of action' of most categories is *Resources*, currently under development. It will be a sort of 'link' at the end of the description field of each entry that will allow the display of further information that is not strictly part of the record, but is nevertheless relevant. This information could take any form: an internet link to a related site, links to other categories of the Roundtable that have information connected to the record, or even pages (perhaps in PDF format) that contain the whole record or excerpts of it.

Giving our *clients* the possibility of using the Roundtable Database according to their needs, rather than our projections of what they may want, has been the main lesson we have learned from these first experimental years. We have realized that we need to give our users tools to understand and even train themselves in fields where they are not specialists, thus we are enlarging the static site with useful practical information and we are re-writing the help section to cover both technical and editorial issues. In short, we have come to think that in order for our mission to be

truly fulfilled, we as an educational institution must be 'customer-oriented' as commercial enterprises are, because our goal is to reach as many people as possible with our 'product'. Good content, impeccable quality control, and ease of site access and navigability are therefore essential to becoming a valuable instrument that many people will both use and find useful.