

Fritz-Heiner Mutschler

Latin a World Language? China as Test Case

Abstract: The subject of this paper is the role of Latin in late medieval and early modern China and the extent to which this role supports the claim that Latin was a “world language”. The first part of the paper analyzes the use of Latin in China: Latin as a liturgical language, as an administrative and working language, as language of theology and philosophy, as language of science and technology, as language of diplomacy. While the content of the respective texts was rich and varied, the authors in charge were exclusively Europeans. The involvement of a small number of Chinese collaborators remained limited. In the second part of the paper the role of Latin is compared to that of today’s “world language” of English in countries where it is not the population’s mother-tongue. The results are unambiguous. Despite its central importance for the exchange of information between China and Europe, the status of Latin in China never came anywhere near that of English among the majority of countries in the present world. In some of them (as in India), it is the or one of the official languages, while in many others (such as China) it is the favorite foreign language in the education system.

Keywords: world language, Jesuit mission, role of Latin in China, Latin and English compared

The first years of the new millennium saw the publication of three impressive histories of the Latin language, those by N. Ostler, W. Stroh, and J. Leonhardt.¹ In all three, an essential story line is the development of Latin from the language of a region, Latium, to a language of the world, from local language to global language. But none of the three works discusses the role of Latin in China.² Thus, when I was invited to participate in the Siena conference on “Global Latin” and give a paper within the subject area of “Latin in China from ca. 1300 to ca. 1700”, I thought: why not address the topic *in toto* and try to find out how the history of Latin in China during these centuries fits into its development from local language to global language? Or, to give the question a sharper edge: to what extent does this history support its claim of being a “world language”, and to what extent does it not?

1 Ostler (2007), Stroh (2007), Leonhardt (2009/2013) (in what follows I refer to the English edition of 2013).

2 Stroh and Leonhardt do not mention China at all. Ostler refers to China and Chinese a few times for reasons of comparison. The role of Latin in China is not touched upon by him either.

A The Uses of Latin in China

In order to provide a basis for the discussion of our question, in the first part of my paper I give a very plain overview of the uses of Latin in China in the aforementioned period.³ I distinguish five kinds of use and I characterize them with respect to the subject matter and to the social framework, in particular the participants, of the respective discourses.

1 Latin as a Liturgical Language

I start with the use of Latin that is the subject of our earliest testimony, its use as the language of the Christian ritual. In 1294, the Franciscan priest Giovanni da Montecorvino arrived as the first Catholic missionary in Khanbalik, the capital of the Yuan Dynasty, present-day Beijing. He stayed there for 34 years until his death and pursued his missionary work.⁴ In his first letter from China he reports *inter alia*:

Item emi successive XL pueros, filios paganorum etatis infra VII et XI annorum, qui nullam adhuc cognoscebant legem, et baptizavi eos, et informavi eos licteris latinis et ritu nostro, et scripsi pro eis psalteria cum ymnariis XXX et duo breviaria, ex quibus XI pueri iam sciunt officium nostrum. Et tenent chorum et ebdomadas sicut in conventu, sive sim praesens sive non. Et plures ex eis scribunt psalteria et alia opportuna. Et dominus imperator delectatur multum in cantu eorum. Campanas ad omnes horas pulso et cum conventu infantium et lactentium divinum officium facio.⁵

This is an amazing testimony, even independent of its early date. Latin communication is here presented as vertical communication – communication between

3 Of great help for the 17th century, and inspiring in general, is Golvers (2020).

4 For a concise survey of this work, see Cameron (1970) 90–106.

5 Wyngaert (1929) 347–348. For textual variants see Moule (1921) 86. For a brief presentation of Giovanni's missionary achievements, including translations of his letters, see Moule (1930) 166–215: Chapter VII: *The Mission of the Franciscan Brothers*. His translation of the passage quoted reads as follows (173): «Also I have bought one after another forty boys, the sons of pagans, of an age between seven and eleven years, who were as yet learning no religion. And I have baptized them and taught them Latin letters and our rite; and I have written for them thirty Psalters with Hymnaries and two Breviaries, with which eleven boys now know our Office and maintain the choir services and weekly turns as [we do] in a convent whether I am present or not. And several of them are writing Psalters and other necessary things. And the lord emperor is greatly delighted with their chanting. I strike the bells at all the hours, and perform the divine Office with a congregation of babes and sucklings».

human believers and God. Its content is characterized as prayers and praise, and it includes among its human participants Chinese youths.

This story line finds its continuation three hundred years later, when Matteo Ricci reports on the «diligence» of some members of his flock «in learning the Latin prayers, such as the wife of Li Yingshi, who could recite the *Confiteor*».⁶

2 Latin as an “Administrative” or “Working Language”

Moving from vertical to horizontal communication, the letter by Giovanni da Montecorvino just mentioned belongs to the numerically largest and chronologically most extensive corpus of Latin texts connected with China: the correspondence between the Christian missionaries and the centers in Rome, be it the central offices of their orders or the Vatican itself. That Latin served as a working language within the missionary orders and the ecclesiastical apparatus should cause no surprise. The personnel involved were international, representing most European nations and languages. Since everybody had excellent training in Latin, its use as general medium of communication was natural.

Many letters of this kind are preserved, not least from missionary stars like Matteo Ricci or Ferdinand Verbiest.⁷ As for their content, these letters were, of course, basically concerned with the mission: its strategy, its progress, its difficulties. Topics were organizational matters, theological questions, the structure of the Chinese state and of Chinese society, the obstacles put up and the avenues offered by Chinese culture etc. Since the content of these texts was rich and varied, many of the “business” letters contained the seeds of other types of discourse and other uses of Latin, which we will have to consider.

But first let us look once more at the personnel active in these exchanges. They, obviously, took place between China and Europe. What we must not overlook, however, is the fact that at both ends of this communication there were exclusively Italian, Portuguese, French, German, Dutch, Belgian etc. participants, which is to say that we have here, in terms of national or cultural affiliation, a purely intra-European discourse in which no Chinese were involved.⁸

6 Hsia (2010) 255, with reference «to eight letters written by Ricci in 1605 that testify to his optimistic attitude» at the time.

7 For Ricci's letters, see D'Arelli (2001); for Verbiest's letters, see Golvers (2017).

8 Exceptions are late and small in number. About the earliest example see Poole (2015).

3 Latin as a Language of Theology and Philosophy

One of the central problems of the mission was the question of how to make the contents of the Christian creed accessible to potential Chinese converts. This was a task that could not be undertaken successfully without developing an understanding of Chinese religious and philosophical traditions and without finding ways to relate the Christian message, and more generally Western ways of thinking, to them. In this endeavor, Latin played a crucial role.

On the one hand, pertinent problems were discussed in the correspondence between China and Europe, in which, in addition to the religious personnel, leading European intellectuals from various backgrounds took part as well.⁹

On the other hand, both in China and Europe independent publications began to appear which conveyed relevant information. In this case, too, Latin was of central importance. Michele Ruggieri, the often-underestimated older companion of Matteo Ricci, can serve as example. Recognizing the necessity of providing his potential flock with a brief exposition of the new creed, he started working on a catechism in Chinese. At the beginning of 1584, he informed the Jesuit general of this endeavor, announcing «that he would submit a Latin synopsis to the other fathers of the Company to obtain approval for publication».¹⁰ At the end of the year, the catechism – which was called by a visiting fellow Jesuit a «translation from Latin» – was published under the title *Tianzhu shilu*, «A Veritable Record of the Lord of Heaven».¹¹

But Ruggieri was also active “in the other direction”: while a missionary in Guangdong province, he started the translation of the central Confucian corpus, the *Sishu*, the *Four Books*. After his return to Europe, he continued and completed the work between 1590 and 1592 in Rome. It was, of course, a translation into Latin. A small portion of it was published in 1593, but because of doubts about Ruggieri’s Chinese language skills, most of the work remained in manuscript form.¹²

In Matteo Ricci’s much richer production one can observe the same pattern of bidirectionality,¹³ and in the years and decades that followed the number of Latin

⁹ In the early years, correspondence with the latter, too, was mostly in Latin; in later years it was increasingly in French. See the example of Leibniz, whose exchange with Jesuits in China is easily accessible in Widmaier/Babin (2006).

¹⁰ Hsia (2010) 87. According to Hsia, the Latin synopsis is published in Tacchi-Venturi (1913) 498–540.

¹¹ Hsia (2010) 94.

¹² For a more detailed account, see Beecroft (2016).

¹³ Cf. Hsia (2010) *passim*.

works translated into Chinese and of Chinese works translated into Latin kept growing. As eminent examples of translations from Latin into Chinese I mention only Francisco Furtado's and Li Zhizao's translation of the Coimbra (i.e. Latin) edition of Aristotle's *Categories* (Hangzhou 1631)¹⁴ and Ludovico Buglio's translation of large parts of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* (Peking 1654–1677). As examples of translations from Chinese into Latin I highlight the translation of three of the *Four Books*¹⁵ in the first great exposition of Confucianism to the west: *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus, sive, Scientia Sinensis Latine Exposita* by four Jesuit successors of Matteo Ricci (Paris 1687),¹⁶ and François Noël's *Sinensis Imperii Classici Sex* (Prague 1711).¹⁷

As for the personnel, we can repeat that the correspondence between China and Europe was a purely intra-European affair. Concerning the independent publications, the situation was more complex. On the one hand, for the publications in both Europe and China, the decisive figures were without doubt the missionaries. On the other hand, it is also clear that for the Chinese publications they had from early on the support of indigenous assistants or collaborators. The question is how we should imagine this collaboration. The source material is scanty, and undoubtedly the individual cases differed from each other. But overall, the most recent biographer of Matteo Ricci, R. Po-chia Hsia, is probably on the right track when he sees the contribution of the majority of the Chinese helpers as having consisted in copy-editing rather than in direct input into the translation.¹⁸

14 For an interesting analysis of the work, see Wardy (2008).

15 The three books included are *Daxue* (*Great Learning*), *Zhongyong* (*Doctrine of the Mean*), and *Lunyu* (*Analects*). Not included is *Mengzi* (*Mencius*).

16 For a critical appraisal, in particular of the presentation of the *Lunyu*, see Meynard (2015). Apart from the translations, which are accompanied by notes, the work contains also a *Proemialis Declaratio*, an introduction to numerous aspects of the Confucian tradition (cf. Balbo 2020), a *Philosophorum Sinensium Principis Confucii Vita*, and a *Tabula Chronologica Monarchiae Sinicae* with a longish *Praefatio*.

17 The work contains for the first time all of the *Four Books*, including the *Mengzi* (*Mencius*), and in addition the *Xiaojing*, the *Classic of Filial Piety*, and the *Xiaoxue*, *Lesser Learning*, a central work of the most important Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi (12th cent.).

18 The first relevant case may be not atypical. We have already touched upon it. Francisco Cabral, the rector of the Jesuit college in Macao, after a visit to Zhaoqing, Ruggieri's and Ricci's first inland station, speaks of one of the earliest Chinese converts, with the Christian name Paul, as the "translator" of Ruggieri's catechism (Hsia 2010, 94). But apart from the fact that it is unclear whether or not in this case one should speak of a Latin original that was translated into Chinese, it is rather improbable that Paul, who had been hired as a tutor only a few months before the publication of the catechism, had acquired so swiftly the linguistic competence necessary to translate a Latin text into Chinese. So, «it is probably more accurate to think of him as the copy-editor or translation consultant of Ruggieri's Chinese text» (Hsia loc. cit.). For two other contem-

4 Latin as a Language of Science and Technology

As is well known, one precondition of the success of the Jesuit mission in China was the interest and competence of many of its protagonists in science and technology. Based on this competence, men like Matteo Ricci, Adam Schall, and Ferdinand Verbiest became central figures in the exchange of scientific and technical knowledge between China and Europe. The communicative constellation was pretty much the same as in the theological-philosophical discourse. The exchange took place in the correspondence between missionaries and European experts, often in Latin, and in independent publications, in the production of most of which Latin played a role as well.

To point only to a few cases: In the last decade of his life, Matteo Ricci produced a translation of the first six books of Euclid's *Elements*, i.e. of the Latin version of the *Elements* by Christopher Clavius (Peking 1607), into Chinese. Some 30 years later, Johann Adam Schall von Bell translated Georg Agricola's *De re metallica* (Peking 1640). And in the next generation, just as Schall von Bell had done before, Ferdinand Verbiest published *inter alia* several works in Chinese on Western astronomy – surely based, to a large extent, on scholarly literature and correspondence in Latin.

As concerns output in “the other direction”, Nicolas Trigault's Latin adaptation of Matteo Ricci's Italian China Journal *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas Suscepta ab Societate Jesu* (Augsburg 1615, Lyon 1616, Cologne 1617), was crucial for informing about and arousing interest in many aspects of Chinese geography, history, and culture.¹⁹ Interest in special fields was served by works like Michael Boym's *Flora Sinensis* (Wien 1656) and his *Specimen Medicinae Sinensis* (Frankfurt 1682)²⁰ and *Clavis Medica* (Nürnberg 1686).

Both lists could be expanded *ad libitum*. But for our theme of Latin as a world language, two testimonies about the specific nature of the cooperation between the missionaries and their Chinese helpers is of greater interest. They concern Xu Guangqi, one of the most erudite and certainly the most powerful supporter of the missionaries in the first part of the 17th century. Xu had found the Christian creed through Matteo Ricci and had been baptized in 1603. Given their close relationship and Xu's proven qualification as a scientist, it was natural that he became Ricci's most important collaborator in the translation (of Clavius' Latin

porary statements about the nature of Jesuit-Chinese collaboration, which point in the same direction, see below.

¹⁹ On the relationship between Ricci's Italian original and Trigault's Latin adaptation, see Gernet (2003).

²⁰ The authorship of this work is disputed: see Golvers (2000) and Kajdański (2017).

translation) of Euclid's *Elements*. In his preface, Ricci describes the nature of their cooperation: He himself «first translated the books into Chinese orally and Xu wrote down the statements and then polished them to the style of the classical Chinese. Xu even revised the translation three times after that».²¹ This corresponds to what Adam Schall reports about Xu Guangqi's linguistic contribution to the great project of the translation of astronomical works that Xu, by then of high rank within the imperial bureaucracy, directed a quarter of a century later: «These [works] . . . saw the light of day, having been compiled with persistent labor during a period of around five years and then polished in Chinese by Doctor Paul [= Xu Guangqi]: Additionally favored by the fact that they had found a man who not less with facility and elegance of style than with knowledge of the subject matter adorned and gave splendor to everything».²² That Schall doesn't claim any knowledge of Latin for Xu is hardly a coincidence.²³

5 Latin as a Language of Diplomacy

Perhaps the most curious use of Latin in China is the fifth: its use as a language of diplomacy. In the 1670s, tensions between China and Tsarist Russia developed over the border area along the Amur river. In 1676, the Tsar sent Nikolai Govri-lovic Spathary Milesku as envoy to Beijing to discuss the matter. The problem was that Spathary, a polyglot with rich experience as an interpreter and diplomat, knew neither Manchu nor Chinese. Since none of the officials in the imperial apparatus spoke a western language, Verbiest was asked to talk to Spathary.²⁴ This he did, and they used Latin to communicate. The two men got along very well, but Spathary's visit stabilized the situation only temporarily. About ten years later tensions arose again, but fortunately, before military skirmishes developed

21 Translation Wu (2008) 259. Similarly Hsia (2010) 252–253. For the original wording, see Xu (1949) 262.

22 Schall (1672) 14: *Haec . . . , quinque plus minus annorum spatio, assiduo labore compilata, ac tum a Doctore Paulo Sinice limata, prodierunt in lucem: Hac insuper re felices, quod Virum in eo nacti essent, qui non minus facilitate & elegantia styli, quam subjectae materiae notitia, omnia & ornaret & illustraret.* [The antecedent of *felices* – and the subject of the *quod*-clause – is unclear.]

23 Things may have been different with Li Zhizao, the collaborator of Francisco Furtado (see above 57). Although in his case there exist no clear contemporary testimonies and other scholars disagree, the most profound analyst of Furtado's and Li Zhizao's translation of Aristotle's *Categories* assumes for Li Zhizao a contribution far beyond mere copy-editing: Wardy (2008) 69–149 (= Chapter 2).

24 For analyses of Verbiest's role in this affair, see Miasnikov (1994) and Hao (1994).

into war, the two sides re-opened negotiations, this time in Nerchinsk.²⁵ Although Spathary was not part of the new Russian delegation and Verbiest had died shortly before, the talks were once again carried on through the mediation of three Latin-speakers: a Pole, Andrzej Bielobocki, for the Russian side and a French and a Portuguese Jesuit for the emperor. The result of the negotiations was the treaty of Nerchinsk of 1689, with the authoritative version formulated in Latin, and accompanying versions in Russian and Manchu. This means that, Latin, once again, did play a role in China, but also that “Latin in China” was once again the Latin of Europeans.

B Latin a World Language?

What do these observations tell us about our guiding question: do they support the claim of Latin being a “world language”? Everything depends, of course, on definition. If we understand by “world language” “a language that is used in many parts of the world”, then our survey of the uses of Latin in China supports this claim. So, for Latinists, the temptation is great to simply leave it at that and enjoy their ward’s success.

However, I suggest that we not do this but instead have a comparative look at the language that is *the* world language of our time, namely English. My idea is to see whether the features that define English as a world language apply also to “Latin in China”. The purpose of this endeavor is less to justify or contest the designation of Latin as a world language – which, as we said, is and will always be a matter of definition –, than to gain a deeper understanding of the role of Latin in China by putting it in historical perspective.

1 “World Languages”: Latin and English

As a point of reference, I take David Crystal’s classic *English as a Global Language*.²⁶ Here we read that «no language has ever been spoken as mother-tongue in more than a few countries» and, therefore, to achieve «global status», «a language has to be taken up by other countries around the world».²⁷ This happens in two main

²⁵ For a recent reconstruction of these negotiations, see Perdue (2010).

²⁶ Crystal (2003).

²⁷ Crystal (2003) 4.

ways: either a language is made the official language or one of the official languages of a country in which it is not the mother-tongue of the majority of the population, or a language becomes the favorite foreign language in a country's education system.²⁸ Both possibilities can currently be observed regarding English. English is one of the official languages in India and several other countries with a comparable initial language-situation, and it is the favorite language in the foreign-language teaching of more than a hundred countries in the world.²⁹

Looking at the situation of Latin in China, one might be tempted to say that some of our observations support the claim of Latin being a world language. Thus, its role in connection with the treaty of Nerchinsk arguably gave it the status of a semi-official language, and the fact that Giovanni da Montecorvino taught it to a group of little boys shows that already in the late medieval period it was part of foreign-language instruction in China.

But we must admit that this line of argument would be rather forced. Even at its height during the "Jesuit centuries" Latin did not have an official role in China comparable to that of English in countries like India. And concerning the study of Latin, it was taught by missionaries to potential converts and collaborators (though scarcely in institutionalized settings, it seems), but it never made its way into the Chinese educational system, i.e. into the imperial exams or the preparatory courses for them.

Thus, we must state that, as far as China is concerned, even in its best centuries Latin was not playing the role of a world language in the sense that English is today.

2 Tentative Explanation of Differences

The above observation is trivial, but apart from the fact that it sometimes cannot hurt to explicitly state the trivial, it leads us to a final question of greater historical interest. This question is: how can we explain the fact that, despite its central importance for the exchange of information between China and Europe, the status of Latin in China did not come anywhere near to that which nowadays English has reached in so many countries of the world, including China? As in most cases of the kind, several factors were of significance. I will address four of them.

²⁸ Crystal (2003) 4–5.

²⁹ Crystal (2003) 5.

a Socio-Linguistic Character

First, there was the special sociolinguistic character of the Latin of the period. Latin was no longer the mother-tongue of a people or of the populace of a state. Instead, it was the liturgical language of a religion, the business language of institutions related to that religion, and the *lingua franca* in which the intellectual elite of one part of the world discussed its scholarly problems. This is to say that Latin was no longer a language of daily life, a fact which *a priori* eliminated it at least as an object of learning in wider circles.³⁰

On the other hand, China was a special case. It had a centralized administrative system, with a civil service composed of intellectually gifted and systematically trained men, who were carefully selected through an ascending sequence of exams. This would seem to have offered an ideal opportunity to quickly and effectively institutionalize training in an important foreign language, even if it was not a language of daily life. This did not happen, and it stands to reason to ask why.

b Chinese Self-Perception

At least to some extent, Chinese self-perception was probably a factor involved, something that played a role in all Chinese dealings with the outside world. Although it is always risky to generalize, one can probably safely observe that for a long time Chinese self-perception was characterized by the view that the Middle Kingdom was the most powerful state in the world, politically, economically, and culturally superior to the countries around it, and therefore, in principle, self-sufficient. For centuries, representatives of foreign states encountered this attitude in Chinese authorities, with the notorious embassy of Lord Macartney, at the end of the 18th century, being one of the most prominent examples.³¹ This sense of self-sufficiency was not conducive to the stressful study of a difficult foreign language.

³⁰ See Ostler (2007) 292–293: «Latin was widespread, certainly, but only in the highest strata of society, and among men. When education was expanded to take in larger segments of Europe's population, including many more women, Latin was seen as too impractical for local, daily life to be offered much more widely».

³¹ Cf. Spence (1991) 122–123. The mission was financed by the British East-India Company but was undertaken in agreement with King George III's government. Macartney made it to Beijing and was even granted an audience with Emperor Qianlong, but in the end achieved nothing, either with respect to the opening of ports for international trade or to establishing a permanent diplomatic residence in Beijing. Instead, he was handed a message for his king, which stated that China needed nothing from other countries and that the development of closer relations was therefore of no use for either side.

c Jesuit Availability

This is, of course, only part of the picture. Another part, one decisive for the Jesuit mission, was that, starting with Matteo Ricci, the competence of the missionaries in cartography, astronomy, mathematics etc. aroused the interest of members of the bureaucratic elite, who realized that in these fields much was to be gained from the West and who therefore encouraged and supported the translation of pertinent European – which at the time meant Latin – texts into Chinese. Interestingly, this led to the launch of concrete projects, like the afore-mentioned translation of scientific and technological texts,³² but not to the institutionalization of Latin language programs.

Why not? I suspect the most important reason for this was lack of necessity or, to put it positively, the steady availability of the Jesuits. Out of strategic considerations, from a certain point of time the missionaries to be sent to China were partly selected for their scientific competence. Given the additional linguistic talent of many of them, this had as a result that for many years there were always highly qualified Western specialists around who could take the lead in the ongoing translation activities. Their competence and dedication allowed the Chinese collaborators to stay in the second row and to contribute to the common undertakings more through their excellence in literary Chinese than through their knowledge of Latin.

d Lack of Political-Military Backing

Fourthly and finally, we have to look in a very different direction. We observe that another important factor for the propagation of a language in foreign territory did not exist for Latin in China. Two unlikeable contemporaries of Ruggeri and Ricci had this factor clearly in focus. In 1584, the Spanish Jesuit Alonso Sanchez wrote in a letter to the Jesuit Vice-Provincial of Japan that the «conversion of China by preaching» seemed to be impossible and that he tended to believe those who say «that this business will have to be concluded by God in the manner of New Spain and Peru».³³ A little later, Juan Batista Román, a Spanish envoy to the Far East, conveyed Sanchez's position in a letter to his king. One passage is of particular interest because it includes the problem of language in the argument:

³² See above 58–59.

³³ Quoted in Hsia (2010) 85 with reference to Tacchi-Venturi (1913) 425–426.

The Chinese, with their impossible language, cannot be converted to Christianity, being a proud people disdainful of foreign ways. We will never in our whole lives come to an understanding with them until some minimum part of Your Majesty's *power* has entered into this territory and necessity *forces* them to learn our language which is easier (for them) than for us to learn theirs.³⁴

Having tried for many years to make some progress with this “impossible” language, I can, to a certain extent, sympathize with Sanchez’s impatience, but I reject, of course, his conquistadorish solution to the problem. This does not exclude, however, the possibility that he was right to assume that the strongest motivation for the study of a foreign language is the political and military pressure exercised by speakers of this language. Our global-language authority Crystal, at any rate, explicitly agrees, observing that «a language has traditionally become an international language for one chief reason: the power of its people – especially their political and military power».³⁵

Now, it is obvious that Latin did not have this kind of political or military backing in the one and a half centuries during which it had a chance to spread in China. It was not the language of a state from whose political and military pressure it could have profited.³⁶ In addition, the European powers acting in East Asia were not yet prepared to exercise the violence towards China that they were already exercising in other parts of the world. Thus, there was no support for the propagation of Latin from this side either.

3 English as Counterexample

By way of contrast, it would be illuminating to look at what happened around the same time with Spanish and Portuguese in Middle- and South-America. But in a short paper one cannot do everything. Therefore, I will simply stay with China and with English. If I am not mistaken, the development of this relationship in the last two centuries supports our explanatory reflections about Latin in China *e contrario*.

During the 19th century, the Western powers abandoned every restraint with respect to China. By brute violence they forced their way into the country, compelling it to open its doors to military detachments, businessmen and missionar-

³⁴ Quoted in Hsia (2010) 85 with reference to “Archivo General de Indias, Patronato 25, 22, available online www.upf.es/fhuma/eeao/projectes/che/516/roman.htm/”.

³⁵ Crystal (2003) 9.

³⁶ When Sanchez and Román spoke of “our language” they spoke, in all probability, not of Latin but of Spanish.

ies alike. The superiority of the foreign powers was such that it could no longer be denied by anyone. The necessity for reform was as obvious as the fact that such reforms had to include the acquisition of at least part of the knowledge and the capacity upon which Western superiority was based. Since Great Britain and, increasingly, the United States were playing a leading role in the Western activities – Hong Kong was even made a British colony – it was natural that English gain preeminence as a linguistic medium within the Chinese endeavor to gain ground in her involvement with the West. English, a language of daily life as well as of scholarship, was taught in part of the missionary schools and, starting in the 1860s, also in a number of state institutions. In addition, of the men and women sent in mounting numbers to study abroad, many went to England and the United States, such as e.g. Yan Fu, who around the turn of the century became one of the most important mediators of Western ideas to the East through his translation of works like Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, Herbert Spencer's *The Study of Sociology*, and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*.³⁷

This development did not continue straightforwardly. Years of turmoil and chaos were followed by the establishment of the People's Republic in which, for some time at least, Russian was the language of communication with the West. During the last decades, however, English has been firmly established as the foremost foreign language in Chinese education. It is now taught in middle schools all over the country and university studies are hardly possible without it. In addition, despite recent developments, it is still an official language in Hong Kong.³⁸

³⁷ For Yan Fu's role in those years, see Spence (1991) 301–304 and 314–315.

³⁸ On the whole, the history of English in China appears simply as part and parcel of its history in the world, as summarized by Crystal (2003) 10: «English [. . .] was apparently 'in the right place at the right time'. By the beginning of the 19th century, Britain had become the world's leading industrial and trading country. By the end of the century, the population in the USA [. . .] was larger than that of any of the countries of Western Europe, and its economy was the most productive and fastest growing in the world. British political imperialism had sent English around the globe, during the 19th century, so that it was the language 'on which the sun never sets'. During the 20th century, this world presence was maintained and promoted almost single-handedly through the economic supremacy of the new American superpower».

Conclusion

Looking from here back to the position of Latin in late medieval and early modern China, we may take its multiple uses there as a justification for calling it a “world language”. At the same time, however, we should remain conscious of the fact that its role in China was never even close to that of today’s indisputable “world language”, English.

Of course, for us Latinists this admission is painful. But there is a consolation. The name of this consolation is script. As is generally known, the earliest English or Anglo-Saxon script was runes (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Row of runes (Wikipedia, s.v. “Anglo-Saxon runes”).

They did not last long and never achieved international status. Instead, if we again take China as test case, we observe that the script the Chinese chose with which to reproduce their language phonetically and which nowadays can be seen, beside the Chinese characters, e.g. on street signs all over the country is not English runes but the Latin alphabet (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Street name sign in Beijing (Private photo).

Thus, the test case China might fail to support the claim that Latin can count as a (one-time) world *language*, but it unquestionably supports the claim that the Latin alphabet can count as a world *script*.

Bibliography

- Balbo (2020): Andrea Balbo, "Classics, Latin and Greek Authors in the *Proemialis Declaratio of Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (1687)", in: *Itineraria* 19, 153–172.
- Beecroft (2016): Alexander Beecroft, "Comparisons of Greece and China". Invited Review Essay for *Oxford Handbooks Online*. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935390.013.14.
- Cameron (1970): Nigel Cameron, *Barbarians and Mandarins: Thirteen Centuries of Western Travelers in China*, Oxford.
- Crystal (2003): David Crystal, *English as a Global Language*. Second Edition, Cambridge.
- D'Arelli (2001): Francesco D'Arelli (ed.), *Matteo Ricci: Lettere (1580–1609)*, Macerata.
- Gernet (2003): Jacques Gernet, "Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella Cina de Matteo Ricci (1609) et les remaniements de sa traduction latine (1615)", in: *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 147, 1, 61–84.
- Golvers (2000): Noël Golvers, "Philippe Couplet, S.J. (1623–1693) and the authorship of Specimen *Medicinae Sinensis* and some other Western writings on Chinese medicine", in: *Medizinhistorisches Journal* 35, 175–182.
- Golvers (2017): Noël Golvers (ed.), *Letters of a Peking Jesuit. The Correspondence of Ferdinand Verbiest, SJ (1623–1688)*, revised and expanded, Leuven (Leuven Chinese Studies XXXV).
- Golvers (2020): Noël Golvers, "Latin as the Vehicular Language in the Scholarly Communication Between Europe and China in the 17th Century: Correspondence; Books and Libraries; Translations", in: *Itineraria* 19, 127–151.
- Hao (1994): Zhenhua Hao, "Ferdinand Verbiest and Sino-Russian Relations", in: John W. Witek (ed.), *Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–1688): Jesuit missionary, scientist, engineer and diplomat*, Nettetal (Monumenta Serica Monograph Series 30), 281–296.
- Hsia (2010): R. Po-Chia Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552–1610*, Oxford.
- Kajdański (2017): Edward Kajdański, "Michael Boym's *Medicus Sinicus*", in: *T'oung Pao* 103, 448–472.
- Lonhardt (2009/2013): Jürgen Leonhardt, *Latein: Geschichte einer Weltsprache*, Munich / *Latin: Story of a World Language*, Cambridge, MA.
- Meynard (2015): Thierry Meynard, *The Jesuit Reading of Confucius: The First Complete Translation of the Lunyu (1687) Published in the West*, Leiden.
- Miasnikov (1994): Vladimir S. Miasnikov, "Ferdinand Verbiest and His Role in the Formation of Sino-Russian Diplomatic Relations", in: John W. Witek (ed.), *Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–1688): Jesuit missionary, scientist, engineer and diplomat*, Nettetal (Monumenta Serica Monograph Series 30), 273–280.
- Moule (1921): Arthur C. Moule, "The Minor Friars in China", in: *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1, 83–115.
- Moule (1930): Arthur C. Moule, *Christians in China before the Year 1550*, London.
- Ostler (2007): Nicholas Ostler, *Ad Infinitum: A Biography of Latin and the World it Created*, London.
- Perdue (2010): Peter C. Perdue, "Boundaries and trade in the early modern world: Negotiations at Nerchinsk and Beijing", in: *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 43, 341–356.

- Poole (2015): Thomas Poole, "The Letters of Shen Fuzong to Thomas Hyde, 1687–88", in: *Electronic British Library Journal*, 2015, art. 9.
- Schall (1672): Johann Adam Schall von Bell, *Historica Relatio De Ortu Et Progressu Fidei Orthodoxae In Regno Chinensi Per Missionarios Societatis Jesu*, Regensburg.
- Spence (1991): Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, New York.
- Stroh (2007): Wilfried Stroh, *Latein ist tot, es lebe Latein! Kleine Geschichte einer großen Sprache*, Berlin.
- Tacchi-Venturi (1913): Pietro Tacchi-Venturi (ed.), *Opere Storiche del P. Matteo Ricci S.I.*, vol. 2: *Le lettere dalla Cina (1580–1610)*, Macerata.
- Wardy (2008): Robert Wardy, *Aristotle in China. Language, Categories and Translation*, Cambridge (Needham Research Institute Studies 2).
- Widmaier/Babin (2006): Rita Widmaier / Malte-Ludolf Babin (ed./transl.), *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Der Briefwechsel mit den Jesuiten in China (1689–1714). Französisch/Lateinisch–Deutsch*, Hamburg (Philosophische Bibliothek 548).
- Wu (2008): Zhiwei Wu, "Introducing a Western Scientific Work to China: Xu Guangqi and Matteo Ricci's Translation of *The Elements of Geometry*", http://comm.louisville.edu/iic/books/mx1/MX_Volume%20I_253-263_WU.pdf.
- Wyngaert (1929): Anastasius van denWyngaert (ed.), *Sinica Franciscana*, Vol. I: *Itinera et relationes fratrum Minorum saeculi XIII et XIV*, Florence.
- Xu (1949): Xu Zongze, *Mingqingjian yesuhuishi yizhu tiyao*, Shanghai (reprint Beijing 1989).