



## Understanding Ningbo: A study of the influence of Ningbo regional culture on the foreigners in china in the Late Qing Dynasty

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### Abstract

Ningbo is an important port city in the world and a frontier of opening up in China. After it opened as a trading port in the late Qing Dynasty, a great number of foreigners flowed to China and stayed in Ningbo for political, economic, cultural and diplomatic events with a focus on missionary. In a first-hand manner, they were able to experience and understand Ningbo regional culture in an unprecedented depth. The foreigners' knowledge of Ningbo challenged the prevalent negative view of China that Western societies held at the time, and reshaped their overall perception of China.

In missionary affairs, by getting to know the regional culture of Ningbo, the missionaries were able to adapt their strategies and develop an educational missionary approach of "Confucius plus Jesus", which facilitated the acceptance of Christian beliefs among the lower classes of Ningbo. Finally, the exploration of regional culture in Ningbo by foreigners in the late Qing Dynasty profoundly influenced the development of Western Sinology from the nineteenth to the twentieth century.

**Keywords:** Ningbo, regional culture, foreigners in China, sinology

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### 1. Introduction

Ningbo is a sub-provincial city in Zhejiang Province, China. As a national historical and cultural city, Ningbo is rich in regional culture, with a long and brilliant history. Due to its geographical location bordering both the mountains and the Pacific Ocean, Ningbo had developed an excellent port and had good trade and cultural contacts with neighboring countries such as Japan, Korea, South Korea and Vietnam since the establishment of the city during the Tang Dynasty, creating Ningbo's prominent position as a "cultural post" in East Asia. Ningbo's regional culture flourished in the cultural exchange, showing its internal firmness and external plasticity, and attracting the exploration of foreigners. However, from the Ming Dynasty to the early Qing Dynasty, Ningbo Port was once abandoned and its foreign trade was strictly restricted and controlled, which also impeded foreigners from getting to know Ningbo regional culture.

The political situation in the late Qing Dynasty provided an opportunity for foreigners to discover Ningbo's regional culture. The Qing government was defeated in the Opium War and the signed the Treaty of Nanjing with the British government in 1840. Five ports were forced to open under that pact, including Ningbo. Western countries set up consulates and stewards in Ningbo in succession, extended their exclusive semi-colony, which allowed the foreigners to live conveniently and be protected by consulates. Ningbo thus became a popular choice for many foreigners to settle and learn about China <sup>[1]</sup>.

Due to the policy convenience, a large number of foreigners came to Ningbo, most of whom were missionaries. They came into direct contact with Ningbo regional culture in work and daily life. What's more, they also showed the city profile to more foreigners who had never been to Ningbo through various medias, i.e., books, diaries, newspapers, memoirs, and letters, which opened a window for the western world to know more about China.

The foreigners' understanding of Chinese culture and society always starts with a specific location, then gradually rises from a microscopic and concrete understanding to an abstract and macroscopic one. Therefore, Ningbo, as the first and probably the only city for these foreigners to stay, profoundly influenced the shaping of their "China".

As mentioned above, the missionaries were the vanguard and also majority of the foreigners who entered Ningbo in the late Qing Dynasty, whose main purpose was to record comprehensive observations, which helped to provide a real basis for the formulation of missionary strategies to pave the way for the later generations. The interaction between the missionaries' understanding of Ningbo and their regional missionary strategy is particularly noteworthy, as the regional cultural and psychological characteristics of the promising believers were the primary determinant of missionaries' work.

Since the nineteenth century, Western sinology had become a recognized specialized discipline. The study of China entered a new stage of rationality and modernization with a professional team of sinologists which was majorly made up of and transformed from the diplomats, missionaries, merchants, and scholars who had visited China. Their professional knowledge was largely based on their firsthand experience of Chinese life which lent credence to their theories, and also enabled the regional culture of Ningbo to play an obvious role in promoting the development of western Sinology.

## 2. The Formation and Revision of "Chinese Impression"

At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, the West's perception of China changed reversely, and the golden image of China as a state of ceremonies and affluence was gone. This change can already be found in the records of Matteo Ricci, who in its *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas suscepta ab Societate Jesus* argued that the Chinese nationality was arrogant and vain, "seeing all foreigners as barbarians without knowledge". He asserted that the Chinese way of thinking was eminently moral rather than rational, for which the natural sciences were not stimulated by honor like philosophy. Chinese traditional students were only obsessed with Confucian classics for they "were attracted by the hope of the honor and reward that would follow". The absence of a rational spirit contributed to the addiction of superstitious, ignorant and anti-science rituals <sup>[2]</sup>.

The negative image of China in Western society reached its peak in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with the event of the Amherst Embassy to China and the Chinese Rites Controversy. By their words, China was degenerating into a barbaric country. In the middle 19<sup>th</sup> century, the world was no longer as closed as before, providing foreigners more opportunities to visit China than ever before. Based on different perspectives and identities, foreigners in China observed and depicted China in depth, constructing a multi-dimensional image of China. Their understanding of China contributed to the construction of the China's image as "the inferior other", forming a more authoritative discourse model and general concept of China in Western society, which also profoundly influenced the foreigners who came to China in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup>.

However, when they actually arrived in China, what they found might be subversive. As the starting point for their real exploration of Chinese society, Ningbo's regional culture was their focus of attention. Through their knowledge of Ningbo's regional culture, foreigners in China showed two main patterns of behavior. They were either influenced by their cognition to observe selectively and elaborate tendentiously, thus re-enforcing the stereotype of "the inferior other" image of China. Or they were able to be fair and objective. Through the real, unique and beautiful Ningbo regional culture they find, this kind of culture-discoverers

consciously tried to correct the previously portrayed image of China. This was a personal revision of the stereotypical negative image of China, which is extended to a wider overseas audience through mass media channels.

In terms of shaping and solidifying the stereotypical inferior image of China, some foreigners in China, the former kind as mentioned above, deliberately choose the vulgar social phenomena and illiberal cultural contents that can serve to support the point of China's inferior image with the superiority of advanced civilization. This feature is particularly evident in the exaggerated portrayal of Ningbo people as ignorant, ridiculous and despicable, and in the emphasis on the inhuman practices of Ningbo citizens like infanticide and foot-binding. For a particular example, in their words on the religious beliefs of the Ningbo people, they argued that "although anyone can see at a glance the absurdity and despicability of these superstitious activities, all Chinese, no matter rich or poor, seem to be enthusiastic about them <sup>[3]</sup>", which seemed to deliberately corroborate the idea of Matteo Ricci as cited earlier. For another outstanding example, they mocked the Ningbo people for their ignorant and stubborn rejection of Western religions because the locals always considered the top of the Catholic Church to be a "symbol of evil", a "nemesis", and a "bad omen" <sup>[4]</sup>. They also spared no effort to cite their experience of life in Ningbo when describing the inferior status of women and children in China. For example, at the St. Louis Exposition in 1904, ridiculous portraits like sick women with small feet in Ningbo were exhibited, which were organized by the foreign customs officers working in Ningbo <sup>[5]</sup>.

Another distinct scenario is that some foreigners showed to impartially observe and record the regional culture of Ningbo with the effort to objectively convey Ningbo culture and China's image to Western society through their descriptions, so as to correct the long-standing misconceptions, and to cleanse the Chinese people and their civilization of the strange, almost unaccountable and ridiculous impressions that were often put on them <sup>[6]</sup>. They were more progressive-minded than the earlier absurd and crude book in the understanding of the real Ningbo and the real China, because they dared to question the accounts of their predecessors, offering rebuttals based on careful observation and real experience to the prejudices common in writings about China. For example, in his book *China and the Chinese*, Herbert Allen Giles challenged the description of abandoned babies in Ningbo in the books written by previous foreigners in China, arguing that based on his observations, children who died prematurely were properly buried by specialized regional charities, the hearsay custom of discarding living babies was nonsensical. In fact, the practice of infant abandonment in Ningbo had been a long-standing and bizarre rumor among foreigners to China, and Herbert Allen Giles' clarification provided an empirical refutation of this rumor <sup>[7]</sup>. In fact, there is a certain pattern in this seemingly contradictory narrative and ambivalent behavior patterns of foreigners. That is, in their depictions of Ningbo's customs, resources, and crafts, they did not spare the praise words. For example, George Leonard Staunton described Putuo Mountain in Zhoushan Islands as "a paradise on earth" and "a nationally renowned resort <sup>[8]</sup>", and Auguste Haussmann comments Ningbo as undoubtedly one of the most beautiful cities in China that we have visited <sup>[9]</sup>. However, in terms of locals' morality, technology and social development, the "image of Ningbo" often fell into a negative one, which is

incontrovertibly “self-important, backward, ignorant and corrupt”. The ethnic stance and cultural background of foreigners made it difficult to not be influenced by the consciousness base which emphasized the superiority of their own civilization, implying the dichotomy of “us” and “the other” under the Orientalism. But as Herbert Allen Giles said, “I hope to clarify that this phenomenon is no more severe in China than it is in Western Christian countries <sup>[10]</sup>”, some of the foreigners who came to China under the influence of the negative notion of China's image, still managed to view Ningbo's regional culture objectively and compared it with theirs in an unbiased way, writing with a sense of responsibility to convey the correct message of China. In fact, they did do a great contribution to the correction of China's image, we should be fair-minded, recognize and appreciate their contributions.

### 3. The adaptation of the work strategy of missionaries in China

As the foreigners' understanding of Ningbo deepened, the missionary strategies of the missionaries in Ningbo and in China were constantly adjusted and changed. The reasons of missionaries to modify their missionary strategies were diverse, like the changes in the current situation and the continued anti-Christian activities of the Chinese people, among which their deeper understanding of regional culture played an important and unique role. The foreigners identified the cultural genes of the Ningbo regionals, focused on the cross-cultural similarities which would help to work. In sum, in their later work, they adopted Confucianism as a bridge and education as a medium to preach, and carried out a “Confucius plus Jesus” mode of educational missionary work.

Prior to the mid-19th century, missionaries in Ningbo believed that Christianity and Western education could directly and completely replace the Chinese belief and education. Missionaries in Ningbo in the late 19<sup>th</sup> adopted the traditional missionary approach of a purely Western education and preaching in Ningbo at the outset, but with little success. Changing the unbecoming approaches was urgent to be addressed. In their life in the Ningbo area, they found that although the regional people of Ningbo have complex religious beliefs and the city is full of Buddhist, Taoist, and Islamic religious buildings, in general, regardless of what religion they claimed to follow, people were closely related to Confucianism, which means they either consciously accept Confucianism as their personal moral guidance or unconsciously carry the imprint of Confucianism. This discovery led them to re-examine the relationship between Confucianism and Christianity.

At the same time, the way to success advocated by Confucian culture, which included namely being an influential figure and serving the Emperor, made utilitarian studying nationally attractive. As a result, the mastery of Confucian classics which were mainly tested in the imperial competitive examination was regarded as a sign of talent. In addition, the education level in Ningbo had always been so far at the forefront of the country, so that every stratum of society, from the imperial officials to the common people, attached great importance to the education of Confucianism Classics of their offspring. This discovery led them to paying greater attention to educational missionary work, especially the Confucianism education of believers.

Finally, they realized that under the elitist cultural education

of Confucianism, learners were more inclined to become the leisure class that did not engage in farming. Businessmen and craftsmen were despised, which harmfully impeded the development of science, technology, and a liberal economy in traditional Chinese society. This was why modern science and technology did not develop in late Qing China. This discovery led them to pay attention to introduce modern science and technology to locals, and help to get rid of the state of lack of rational deficiency.

In sum, the findings of regional culture provided great insights into the missionaries. As far as the Chinese belief system was concerned, Confucian culture was not directly opposite to Christianity, for Confucian allowed other religious beliefs to coexist. “Confucius left nothing to his followers about gods and spirits. Idolatry is not enough, and people decide for themselves whether or not to practice religion based on interest or taste <sup>[11]</sup>.” It could even be a help to evangelism. Another revelation was that education was the best way to attract the local population. If anyone could provide a quality education for free, parents would be willing to send their children to that school, the one with Confucius courses was even better. So, missionaries should not only teach the creed and Western culture, but also emphasize Confucianism. A final revelation was that the introduction of modern science and technology was an effective way to enlighten people and open the gates of their minds. These revelations guided the specific changes in missionary strategy that followed.

The shift in missionary strategy of the missionaries in Ningbo was marked mainly by two events. Firstly, in September 1845, the Presbyterian Church established a special committee to discuss and adopt the legal status of Confucian education in Christian education <sup>[12]</sup>. Secondly, in 1861, W.A.P. Martin proposed a secular missionary strategy based on his experience during his missionary work in Ningbo, using Western science to promote intellectual enlightenment and to facilitate the conversion of the people to Christianity. The attempts of W.A.P. Martin will be further discussed in subsequent paragraphs, but the significance of this attempt is worth noting in advance, “W.A.P. Martin's activities in Ningbo also laid the foundation for his further missionary work, forming the basis for secularization and regionalization of Western culture's broadcasting <sup>[13]</sup>.”

The adaptation of missionary approaches is mainly reflected in the following new types of missionary work.

The first was the theoretical integration of Confucian and Buddhist culture with Christian culture, which in practice meant interpreting of Christian doctrine by traditional Chinese culture. This type of activity was represented by the publication of W.A.P. Martin's *Evidences of Christianity in Kwanhwa*. In this book, W.A.P. Martin extensively cited Chinese culture as an entry point to promote Christian doctrine, explaining that Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity have a high degree of commonality in the origin of the universe, the goodness of human nature, the principles of loyalty and filial piety, and historical experience. This book reflects W.A.P. Martin's missionary attempts at work in Ningbo just as mentioned above, “that is, the integration of traditional Chinese culture with the spirit of Christ, which also laid the direction of his life's work <sup>[14]</sup>.” In fact, this was the common orientation of many other missionaries in Ningbo, where the interpretation of cultural commonalities enabled them to speak about the Christian faith in terms familiar to the locals, so as to enhance their acceptability, and



to provide an entry point for the spread of the full Christian transaction and the conversion of the people of Ningbo.

The second is the founding of church schools, the educational and moral integration of East and West, and scientific enlightenment. From 1844 to 1927, missionaries founded a total of 20 church schools in Ningbo. Among them, 3 were named after locations, 11 were named after Confucian ideology (i.e., 仁, which means benevolence, 义, which means righteousness, 礼, which means propriety, 智, which means wisdom, 信, which means faith, 德, which means virtue, 才, which means talent, etc.), 3 were named after “中西(Chinese and Western)” and “华英(Chinese and English)”, and only 3 were named after purely Western-style words<sup>[15]</sup>. The missionaries' attempts to combine Christian education with Chinese moral education and their response to the Chinese moral theme could be reflected deeply through the school nomenclature. In addition, the church schools also emphasized the study of the traditional Chinese Confucian classics (the *Four Books and Five Classics*, the *Three Character Classic*, etc.), which enabling students to have a local foothold. One last concrete measure was the arrangement of courses in western natural and applied sciences such as arithmetic, astronomy, geography, physics, and chemistry, and the introduction and translation of western textbooks.

The third is the establishment of publishing and printing institutions, the translation of academic books, and the establishment of newspapers and periodicals. In 1845, the missionaries relocated the Chinese and American Holy Classic Book Establishment, replaced it by the book printing office in Trinity Classical Academy, making Ningbo the center of Chinese ecclesial printing. From 1844 to 1860, 106 kinds of books were published by missionaries in Ningbo<sup>[16]</sup>. During the 14 years, up to 1,394,861 volumes of printed materials were published<sup>[17]</sup>. The publishings were encyclopedic, covering science, society, language and other sections. At the same time, missionaries started a number of local newspapers to spread worldwide news to and broaden the horizons of the locals, the newspapers for example were “Chinese and Foreign Gazette (《中外新报》)” (1854), “Ningbo News (《甬报》)” (1881), and “Ningbo German Handelsblatt(《德商甬报》)” (1898). The purpose of the activities mentioned above was to make Ningbo people appreciate Western civilization, and break out of the closed social circle shaped by the national political and conservative atmosphere, so the locals could better accept international religions.

The “Confucius plus Jesus” mode of educational missionary work was an up-to-date and widely-significant approach explored by the late Qing missionaries on the basis of their understanding of regional culture in Ningbo. The thinking of the Ningbo Presbyterian Church on Confucian education resonated with many missionary communities in China and became a universal guiding strategy, “largely reflecting the attempts of missionary communities in China to distill from the ‘regional’ a ‘Chineseness’ of more universal significance<sup>[18]</sup>.”

In the late 19th century, the identities of the missionaries in Ningbo gradually changed, some of them were “the missionaries in name, but professional sinologists in practice”. While in Ningbo, they conducted research in

various fields such as literature, history, philosophy and natural sciences to serve the foreign strategy of their country. For example, in the 19th century, France established the “Comité scientifique de Kiang-Nan (Scientific Committee of Jiangnan)” in China, which specialized in the study of astronomy, history and church history in the Jiangnan area, and published the “Bulletin of Ningbo” to introduce in detail the history of the church and of the Ningbo area, and to provide information for Sinological research<sup>[19]</sup>. With the gradual advancement of Sinological studies in Ningbo, a number of Sinological academic monographs appeared in the West, reflecting the cutting-edge achievements of Sinology at the time, including many summary introductions to the regional culture of Ningbo. *The Encyclopedia Sinica* written by Samuel Couling, for example, which won the French “Prix Stanislas Julien (the Nobel Prize in Sinology)”, contained an entry on “Ningpo (Ningbo)”, which included information on Ningbo's foreign relations, specialties and trade, the state of the Church, social news, and historical figures<sup>[20]</sup>. In sum, as an important part of Chinese culture, Ningbo's regional culture had greatly enriched the knowledge of Chinese culture in Western Sinology, which was inseparable from the in-depth knowledge of Ningbo's regional culture by foreigners who came to China in the late Qing Dynasty.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the context of the late Qing dynasty, a large number of foreigners who came to China got the opportunity to acquire a deeper understanding of Ningbo's regional culture, and they spared no effort to explore this valuable place and to construct their personal understanding of China, and guided their activities in China through their knowledge of Ningbo's regional culture, among which the transformation of missionary strategies of missionaries is particularly prominent. As part of Chinese culture, Ningbo regional culture was also an important topic and the convincing material for Sinological studies on Chinese political and economic, literary and religious, social and contemporary issues. Ningbo's regional culture received a great deal of attention and had a wide impact on Sinology since the late Qing Dynasty. Thus, the study of Ningbo's regional culture by foreigners who came to China in the late Qing Dynasty had a profound impact on foreigners' understanding of China and on the development of Western Sinology which is worth exploring in-depth. Ningbo is definitely a place of interest in the topics of the history of Sino-Western exchanges and the history of Sinology.

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