

# ***Unveiling Ding Weiliang's Impact on Cross-Cultural Discourse Between China and the West Through A cycle of Cathay***

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**Abstract:** Ding Weiliang, a late Qing-era missionary who dedicated over six decades to China, harbored a profound fascination with Chinese culture, driven by multifaceted motivations such as missionary endeavors, personal inquisitiveness, and political engagement. This scholarly exploration endeavors to dissect the contextual factors that compelled him to act as a conduit, introducing the richness of Chinese culture to the Western hemisphere. It succinctly delineates his pivotal role in the translation of Chinese cultural nuances and the facilitation of the assimilation of scientific and technological advancements. In doing so, it illuminates the nuanced contributions and inherent constraints Ding Weiliang encountered during a pivotal epoch marked by the convergence of Chinese and Western intellectual traditions. This article shows its understanding of Chinese culture through Ding Weiliang's missionary life. This article finds that Ding Weiliang has a profound impact on the development of Chinese scientific concepts.

**Keywords:** Ding Weiliang, *A cycle of Cathay*, cultural exchange, missionary, Western intellectual migration to the East

## **1. Introduction**

"Collections within *A cycle of Cathay* encompass the diaries and essays of Ding Weiliang, providing a profound reflection of his intellectual odyssey spanning several decades in China. This compilation also unveils his diligent endeavors as a missionary, dedicated to fostering nuanced interactions and exchanges between the Chinese and Western cultures. Two pivotal inquiries emerge: firstly, what were the underlying motives that propelled Ding Weiliang to embark on his missionary journey to China? Secondly, in pursuit of his missionary objectives, what distinct and indirect contributions did he render to facilitate a dynamic interplay and mutual enrichment between these two cultural spheres?"

Prior to addressing the posed inquiries, it is paramount to underscore the multifaceted nature of Ding Weiliang's identity. While his primary intent was missionary work, he invariably viewed and assessed Chinese culture through the prism of Christian doctrines, rendering his comprehension and portrayal of Chinese culture inherently dichotomous. This article predominantly draws from the text *A cycle of Cathay* and endeavors to glean insights into Ding Weiliang's observations and cognizance of Chinese society and culture, as discerned from the fragments that span his lifetime.

Commencing with an exposition of Ding Weiliang's arrival in China and his life trajectory, the article proceeds to navigate his exploration of Chinese culture. It discerns the role he played in the intricate tapestry of Sino-Western cultural exchange. Ultimately, it briefly delineates Ding Weiliang's critical assessments of Chinese society and history, alongside his zealous initiatives in promoting the advancement of science within China. Through the prism of his observations of the 'other,' it prompts an introspective examination of our own perspectives.

## 2. Traversing Transoceanic Frontiers: The Missionary Odyssey and Life of Ding Weiliang

Ding Weiliang (W. A. P. Martin, 1827-1916) emerged as a prominent luminary during the twilight of the Qing dynasty, embodying the zeal of American missionary endeavors in a complex epoch. Commencing his sojourn on Chinese soil in 1850, he embarked on a spiritual pilgrimage that spanned the cities of Ningbo and Beijing, simultaneously sowing the seeds of ecclesiastical education. Ding Weiliang meticulously etched his observations and interpretations of Chinese society and culture into the intricate narrative tapestry of *A cycle of Cathay*, an autobiographical magnum opus. This literary enterprise not only served as a conduit for the transmission of his multifaceted persona but also as a kaleidoscope through which his rich life experiences were refracted.

Ding Weiliang epitomized the intricate persona of a devout Christian missionary harboring grand evangelistic aspirations, an impassioned reformer fervently committed to the infusion of Western advancements spanning the realms of scientific knowledge, educational paradigms, and modernization ideals, and a sinologist who not only held Chinese culture in profound esteem but also ardently championed its dissemination across international borders. This intricate amalgamation of roles inevitably precipitated a multilayered and occasionally enigmatic lens through which he appraised the nuanced tapestry of Chinese culture. Of paramount significance, this complexity was inextricably linked to the broader global milieu of the 19th century, wherein the currents of cross-cultural exchanges and the tides of global dynamics left an indelible imprint on individuals like Ding Weiliang.

Starting from the 16th century, Christian missionaries embarked on their ambitious mission in China, and they did manage to make some impact during the late Ming and early Qing periods. However, the profound clash between their religious doctrines and Chinese culture created immense conflicts, leading to the missionaries' efforts in China ultimately coming to naught.

China, still functioning under a feudal imperial system, lagged behind Western nations that had undergone the Industrial Revolution in terms of both institutional development and technological advancement. Furthermore, China remained obstinately traditional in its thinking, proudly considering itself the "Celestial Empire" and resisting any form of innovation. The Qing government went as far as imposing a ban on all missionary activities in Guangdong province, permitting only foreign merchants to reside there [1].

In the realm of spirituality, traditional Chinese culture deeply rooted itself in the essence of every Chinese individual, serving as the bedrock of their cultural heritage and personal identity. This cultural foundation proved resistant to the influence of foreign cultures. Therefore, the missionaries' plan to religiously transform Chinese culture faced inevitable failure, which is not difficult to comprehend.

However, missionaries possessed unwavering qualities and determination in their religious endeavors. Prior to the arrival of Timothy Richard in China, the pioneer Robert Morrison, who had already devoted nearly 30 years to the cause, was making significant strides. Starting in 1807, Morrison engaged in missionary work in places like Macau and Guangzhou. He became the first person to translate the Bible into Chinese, published China's earliest periodical, "The Statistical Account of the World," and authored the "Morrison Dictionary," contributing to the development of

Sino-Western language exchange. It was Morrison who first recognized the importance of cross-cultural understanding as a prerequisite for effective missionary work [2].

In 1834, Robert Morrison breathed his last in Macau. Sixteen years hence, Timothy Richard alighted in Guangzhou. In juxtaposition to Morrison, Timothy Richard's most illustrious legacy lies in his assiduous endeavors to catalyze interplay and dialogue between the realms of Chinese civilization and the Western milieu. Firstly, he subscribed to Morrison's postulation concerning the exigency of cross-cultural comprehension, thereby amplifying the doctrine of "Confucius plus Jesus" as a missionary ethos. Secondly, amid the dominant ethnocentrism pervading Western narratives, he manifestly exhibited profound veneration for the expanse of Chinese culture. It remains an incontrovertible verity that, by virtue of their proselytizing objectives, Timothy Richard was innately predisposed to the custodianship of colonial interests. Nevertheless, it is paramount to concede his proactive measures in acquainting himself with the intricacies of Chinese culture and actively disseminating the legacy of ancient Chinese civilization to occidental precincts. Moreover, he proffered relatively impartial depictions of pivotal late Qing political occurrences, notably alluding to the "notorious Opium War", the ratification of the "Treaty of Tianjin," the convulsions of the Taiping Rebellion, and more, all while evincing empathy for the Chinese commonalty [3]. In addition, his sagacious grasp of Chinese mores and the trinity of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, coupled with his perspicacious observations regarding the debilities and inertness inherent in China's historiography, institutional framework, and cultural maturation, collectively bestow upon him a truly distinctive perspective.

### **3. Chinese Traditional Cultural External Translation: Ding Weiliang's Presentation of Chinese Culture**

Cultures, being inherently diverse, undergo subjective evaluations influenced by the intrinsic values held by each ethnic group. Missionaries' perceptions of Chinese culture were no exception to this rule. During the late Qing Dynasty, China fell short of Western standards for what constituted "civilization." Yet, amidst their missionary endeavors, Timothy Richard exhibited a proactive inclination towards comprehending and immersing himself in Chinese culture. This proclivity primarily stemmed from a profound spiritual impetus driven by unwavering faith, compelling these missionaries to expand the dominion of Christ under the banner of God's name. Upon his initial arrival in Guangzhou, Timothy Richard did not mince words when characterizing the locals as uncultivated and boorish. However, he swiftly appended, "If they were not heathens, why should I come here?" His less than favorable assessments of the Chinese people were also heavily influenced by his own life experiences, to the extent that he occasionally deemed violence and warfare as necessary means to prompt the local populace to heed the teachings of religion [4]. This mindset typified the prevailing attitude among missionaries, who saw religion as a means to civilize what they regarded as the untamed.

Despite missionary work being Ding Weiliang's initial purpose for coming to China, his extended residency in the country led to a profound appreciation for Chinese social customs, a passionate pursuit of studying Chinese culture, and rigorous scholarly contemplation. These facets became seamlessly woven into his writings, which, when published abroad, provided a comprehensive and objective depiction of the authentic facets of Chinese society to Western nations. Ding Weiliang displayed a keen interest in the accomplishments of ancient Chinese civilization.

To begin with, he recognized the worth of Chinese classics, both in terms of their quantity and quality, employing the "Four Books and Five Classics" as a means to fathom the ethical and moral dimensions of Chinese culture, lauding them as "comprising an unparalleled repository of spiritual wealth." His exploration of Chinese characters was equally fascinating, such as his contention that the horizontal stroke in the character for "sun" signified the Chinese people's early observation of

sunspots. Concerning literary luminaries, he succinctly encapsulated the emergence of a multitude of accomplished intellectuals in China, including perceptive and philosophically inclined thinkers, poets proficient in almost every lyrical genre, and novelists who pioneered modern novel forms, antedating their Western counterparts by a full millennium. He extolled, "Could such a literary monument reflecting the life of one of the world's greatest civilizations not occupy a prominent place in our repositories of knowledge?"

Furthermore, Ding Weiliang introduced Chinese technological innovations, sparing no praise for the Chinese people's preeminent position in the art of printing and their substantial contribution to the flourishing of papermaking. He effectively countered prevalent misconceptions of the time that characterized the Chinese as indolent, uninformed imitators [5].

Ding Weiliang's religious intentions should not be underestimated; he aspires to discover a shared foundation of values between China and Christianity, enabling Christianity to take root in China, with Confucius serving as that foundation. Ding Weiliang contends that the Confucian system established by Confucius forms the bedrock of Chinese societal ethics and morality. He believes that Confucius' concepts of charity and benevolence can coexist harmoniously with Christianity because they bear the closest resemblance in terms of ethics and influence to Jesus. Simultaneously, Ding Weiliang's admiration for Confucius is tinged with a complex cultural psyche. Regardless of his deep appreciation for Confucius' ideas, he also emphasizes that Confucius' Confucian teachings have impacted the propagation of Christianity in China. Consequently, he employs a subtle approach, highlighting the similarities between Confucius and Christ, asserting that there is still an unmet spiritual need that the Confucian system can fulfill.

Scholar Zhao Yi in his discourse similarly interprets Ding Weiliang's grafting of Christian doctrine onto Confucius' thought as a strategic compromise aimed at reducing resistance to Christian dissemination and expanding its influence. Therefore, in *A cycle of Cathay* Ding Weiliang writes: "People have never regarded him as a guardian deity, but purely as a cherished memory and a source of reverence. Consequently, this does not present a direct impediment to the acceptance of Christianity by the Chinese." For Ding Weiliang, Confucius can serve as an excellent entry point for the propagation of Christianity in China. In the book *A cycle of Cathay* alone, Confucius is referenced over 70 times, further fueling Western nations' interest in the study of Sinology.

#### **4. Westward Learning and Eastern Engagement: Ding Weiliang's Critique of China and Impact on Science**

In comparison to Confucianism, Ding Weiliang's assessment of Buddhism and Taoism leans towards a critical perspective. He argues that Chinese Buddhism and Taoism do not entirely fulfill the spiritual needs of the Chinese populace; each has its own limitations. Consequently, Ding Weiliang posits that Christianity possesses the maturity to effectively address this spiritual realm.

Ding Weiliang asserts that Buddhist teachings tend to diminish human dignity, with the benevolent deeds it promotes often coming at the cost of human nature [6]. Furthermore, he critiques the Tao Te Ching for its obscurity, employing overly complex language to broadly encapsulate its content, resulting in a lack of logical precision.

He delves deeper into how Taoism's development, rooted in materialism, closely correlates with the proliferation of superstition. Only Daoist masters can interpret the significance of divination, allowing mentors to profit immensely from this practice. Such superstitious beliefs also impact daily life, as Ding Weiliang provides examples like rain-making ceremonies, river deities' marriages, an excessive reliance on Yin-Yang and Five Elements theory over Western medicine, and the tragic practice of female infanticide, illustrating how Taoism-related superstitions detrimentally affect the lives of Chinese people.

To address this issue, Ding Weiliang suggests a fusion of religion and science. He firmly believes that "in dealing with such superstitions, Christianity is the best, although not the sole, remedy". Additionally, he actively promotes the integration of scientific perspectives among China's upper echelons [7].

In the 19th century, the spread of Christianity was closely intertwined with the development of modern science and industrialization. Missionaries' religious endeavors were intricately connected to the dissemination of scientific and technological knowledge and the fruits of industrialization. Ding Weiliang made significant contributions to the advancement of scientific endeavors in 19th-century China.

He dedicated himself to compiling textbooks for scientific education and practical learning, encompassing fundamental definitions and applications of chemistry, physics, and mathematics. During his tenure as the Chief Examiner of the Imperial Civil Examination at the Tongwen Guan (Bureau of Interpreters), he actively promoted reforms in the imperial examination system by incorporating scientific subjects into the examination curriculum. He initiated medical classes, gradually elevating the influence of Western medicine among both the upper echelons and the general populace.

During his time at the Tongwen Guan in Beijing, Ding Weiliang also spearheaded reforms in the educational system. The Tongwen Guan introduced courses in international public law, political economics, mathematics, astronomy, and practical learning, emphasizing the practical application of knowledge. Under his leadership, teachers and students at the Tongwen Guan translated dozens of books covering topics such as international public law, economics, chemistry, practical learning, natural geography, history, anatomy, and diplomatic consular guides. These translated works were distributed free of charge to Qing Dynasty officials, contributing significantly to the dissemination of scientific and cultural knowledge among the upper classes [8].

While some scholars argue that Ding Weiliang's active introduction of Western learning was fundamentally motivated by safeguarding the interests of European and American nations, conferring "civilization" status upon China within the world hierarchy to maintain their own interests in China while suppressing the rights of China as an equal sovereign nation, it is also crucial to recognize the significance of the Tongwen Guan [9]. It occupies a pivotal place in the history of translation and publishing in China, achievements closely intertwined with Ding Weiliang's relentless efforts [10].

It can be said that during Ding Weiliang's extensive years of service to the Qing government, he made a substantial contribution to the transplantation of Western science and technology to China. His efforts in promoting and disseminating modern knowledge and reforming the educational system played a role in enlightening China and gradually leading it toward modernization.

Moreover, Ding Weiliang, approaching Chinese history and culture from an external standpoint, delivered critiques on its shortcomings. He utilized the concept of "xinmin" (new citizens) from the "Da Xue" (The Great Learning) to question the Qing government's conservative stance and resistance to reform. In reference to specific pieces within the "Shi Jing" (Classic of Poetry), he passionately denounced the unequal treatment of women, asserting that, regardless of the depth of a nation's literary tradition, the practice of regarding women as sacrificial offerings was sufficient to stain a nation's reputation [11].

Undoubtedly, as a missionary offering an outsider's perspective on Chinese culture, Ding Weiliang presented some profound insights. The issues he raised later ignited a far-reaching East-West cultural discourse half a century later.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it becomes evident that although Ding Weiliang initially arrived in China with the primary mission of spreading religion, his several decades of living and working in the country led to



a profound respect for and appreciation of the thriving Chinese civilization. He recognized and celebrated the accomplishments of ancient Chinese culture, seamlessly integrating his positive assessments and attitudes into his writings, thus offering a relatively objective portrayal of China's cultural evolution to the Western world. His interpretations of Confucius and Confucianism left an enduring impact on the field of Sinology beyond China's borders.

Nevertheless, due to his own cultural background, Ding Weiliang's evaluations and scrutiny of Chinese culture inevitably carried certain biases, reflecting a Western cultural sense of superiority and emotional involvement rooted in his religious mission. Such perspectives are understandable. Furthermore, his introduction to Chinese culture not only represented a personal emotional reflection but also served the purpose of safeguarding colonial interests for Western nations. Consequently, viewed through the lens of contemporary scholars, his presentation of Chinese culture might seem somewhat superficial, with his critiques of Chinese culture potentially lacking depth in certain aspects. Nonetheless, during his time, his works served as invaluable resources for gaining insights into China's cultural landscape. His research activities also exerted a discernible influence on Western perceptions of China, contributing to the early development of Western Sinology.

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