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Astronomy in the Jesuit mission to Ming China

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The representation of the physical world has historically played a crucial role in the constitution of the alterity and of inter-states relations, but it has often been neglected by anthropological studies and ethnographies. An analysis of the jesuit mission to Ming China (1577-1644) offers an outstanding opportunity to tackle this issue. In fact, the contextual study of both private letters and publications shows the deep influence of mathematical astronomy and cosmographies on the self-representation of missionaries as intellectuals and astronomers, on the opposition to Christianity by contrasting the penetration of Western science, and on the influence of the European scientific and astronomical revolution in the transmission of different cosmological models by the Jesuit fathers.

Furthermore, the representation of Chinese astronomy in the missionaries' accounts contributed to the creation of a new, negative image of China, that influenced the diplomatic relations between Chinese empire and European power, in particular the outcome of the first British embassy, and the academic debate until the twentieth century.

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