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Introduction: Christian Missionary Perspectives on Food in Asia

JANA VALTROVÁ – UTE WALLENBÖCK

Food is at the center of everyday life. Food as both a natural condition of life as well as an item which reflects important aspects of human cultures, including their values, power relations and hierarchies, has its nutritive, social, cultural, and religious significance. In certain foods and beverages, practical as well as symbolic meanings are combined in a complex network of relations. Dealing with foods is also a way of handling the boundaries between “Us” and “Them”.¹ Food not only represents a tool which mediates communication between humans, but also mediates contact with transcendence.

Quite a lot of research has been done on the topic of food and fasting in an interreligious context,² but this special issue aims at a blind spot – specifically, at the description of food and cuisine cultures through the eyes of Christian missionaries who travelled to Asia (with some interruptions) between the 13th and early 20th century, and reported on food and cuisine cultures to the “Western” world. Missionary discourses on Asian food enable us to explore one of the most intimate aspects of missionary connections to Asian cultures. While many local customs may have been described and (mis)represented by the missionaries with surprise, outrage, and admiration, or just ignored, food is a different issue. It could not be dealt with just by verbal appraisal; nor could it be completely ignored, as the missionaries had to feed themselves somehow. Importing food supplies

- 1 Jonathan Smith, “Differential Equations. On Constructing the Other”, in: Jonathan Smith (ed.), *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, Chicago (IL) – London: University of Chicago Press 2004, 230-250; David M. Freidenreich, *Foreigners and Their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law*, Berkeley (CA): University of California Press 2011.
- 2 Dorothea Weltecke (ed.), *Essen und Fasten. Interreligiöse Abgrenzung, Konkurrenz und Austauschprozesse/ Food and Fasting. Interreligious Differentiations, Competition and Exchange*, Köln – Weimar – Wien: Böhlau Verlag 2017.



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for Christian missionaries from the “West” to some regions of Asia was logistically difficult and expensive; therefore, in many areas they had to rely upon local resources. Through reflections on food – local as well as “Western” – the missionaries negotiated their relationship towards local cultures and religions. Also, food issues could complicate missions in ways that were never expected, the consumption of local foods as well as the observance of certain food habits and rituals sometimes contradicting Christian beliefs and principles. Hence, through food, Christian missionaries in Asia had to face becoming entangled with local cultures and religions.

This special issue contains contributions based on papers presented at one panel during the 24th Biennial Conference of the European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS) held at Palacký University in Olomouc, Czechia, between 24 and 27 August, 2022. The panel discussion was on how missionaries approached the topic of food and looked at their religious, social, and aesthetic concerns relating to daily meals, special occasions, and the experience of dining out. Additionally, the panel also looked at the products, techniques, and tools of the various culinary cultures, and the cultural context for preparing and consuming meals, as described by the missionaries.

In this issue, targeted at readers from various disciplines, we want to highlight the importance of a transdisciplinary approach to this topic. We are interested in the ways these missionaries understood, consumed, or avoided local foods, and how they handled dietary habits, in order to better understand their relationship towards the local culture and religion(s). To form a general picture, we invited scholars from different academic disciplines to participate and agreed to focus mainly on primary sources in European languages as a unifying element in our research.

The contributions in this issue are based on diverse methodological approaches, all of which have proven to be suitable for dealing with the topic of food and religion. To properly understand the importance of food issues in cross-cultural encounters, a large variety of specialized information is needed – this encompassing nutrition, the medicinal use of food by certain ethnic groups, the cultural significance of certain food items, and translational problems of terminology. Indeed, the thematic field is as rich as Asian cuisine. The articles in this issue are organized into clusters according to the regions to which they relate and the time period. The readers, if they follow the order of contributions, will proceed in a direction opposite to the one taken by historical missionaries – from China westward, across the regions of Inner Asia to Tibet, and from earlier periods to more modern times.

Iveta Nakládalová, a scholar of Spanish and Italian philology, is a specialist in Early Modern comparative literature and cultural history. Her contribution deals with the practices of ecclesiastical fasting during the 16th and 17th centuries among missionaries in China and Japan based on first-hand accounts of Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries.

In his contribution, Piotr Gibas, an expert in early Chinese literature and language, deals with Protestant and Catholic missionaries and their perception of foodways in Macao, Hong Kong, and Shanghai during the 16th and 17th as well as the 19th and 20th centuries.

Jana Valtrová, an expert in medieval mendicant missions in Asia, approaches the topic of food through the lens of Religious Studies by looking at the role of kumiss, fermented mare's milk, among the various Christian denominations living in the Mongol empire during the 13th century.

The Sinologist and Tibetologist Ute Wallenböck together with the Mongolist Veronika Zikmundová combine their expertise by looking at the mainly missionary-anthropological accounts of daily diets and the use and consumption of sacred food among Tibetans and Monguors of the cultural and ethnic melting pot of the Kokonor area, comprising parts of contemporary China's Qinghai province, during the late 19th and early 20th century.

The Tibetologists Martin Hanker and Petr Jandáček apply a very specific approach to the topic of food and missionaries. They deal with the Tibetan translation of 'bread' in the Bible provided by the Moravian Herrnhut missionary, Heinrich August Jäschke (1817-1883).

Certainly, many questions remain unanswered and untouched in this current issue. Indeed, it is already now obvious that certain "blind spots" exist in missionary perceptions of Asian diets which would deserve further research. For example, it would be beneficial to employ a broader selection of Asian sources in order to corroborate them with western language sources. Other questions also wait to be addressed in future research. Nevertheless, we hope that readers will enjoy these contributions and that they may inspire new perspectives on issues relating to food and religion in a cross-cultural context.