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Missionary Encounters

In *Manufacturing Confucianism,* Lionel Jensen advances the claim that Jesuit missionaries in the late sixteenth century manufactured Confucianism as a tool for dialogue with their Chinese interlocutors. Jensen defends his use of the word manufacture to describe the process of the encounter, stating that it is the

> …doubleness of its meaning that makes it suitable for disclosing the construction of communities of sense that emerges from these texts. The early meaning of "manufacture" emerged from the interstice between something made by hand and the natural object. What was made by hand was, ipso facto, not God-given. Such an artifact, while it was not natural, was no less real than nature. The significance of "manufacture," like so many other words, comes from the ambiguity of its cognate associations, in this case from the slippery distinction between natural and artificial.[1]

Manufacture is thus an appropriate description for the missionary encounter of the Jesuits with the Chinese. "The Jesuits were directing extraordinary effort at carving a niche, geographic and political, for themselves and for the mission volunteers they presumed would follow."[2] This niche was neither something totally foreign, nor was it something already existent in its given state in Chinese culture. The Confucianism manufactured by the Jesuits was manufactured from native Chinese elements, but fused or hybridized with foreign European elements. Jensen sees the creation of such a hybrid condition as a joint construct. "To speak of the Jesuit missionary community and its efforts to become Chinese in terms of hybridity is a conscious inversion of the use of the term in recent cultural studies, where it represents native, 'postcolonial' movements that resist the essentializing narratives made of indigenous peoples by the colonist. Such inversion of contemporary convention is intended to help identify this group as a self-constituting entity on native Chinese ground."[3] Manufacturing again blurs the distinction between the God-given and man made: Jesuit Confucianism is in China, it makes sense to the Chinese, but the community is defining themselves in terms of their own system, not the already existent Chinese system.

Jensen argues that while the community was native to China and relied on Chinese elements, "the early Jesuit missionaries [only] understood *ru* by analogy with what they knew best, their

[1] Jensen, pp. 22-23.
[2] Jensen, pg. 37.
[3] Jensen, pg. 80.

own order."[4] Ruggieri speaks of this hybrid condition and states that "*in short, we have become Chinese* so that we may gain the Chinese for Christ."[5] This act of becoming Chinese indicates that Ruggieri and Ricci "saw themselves through the prism of their respective representations of the other."[6] Nevertheless, they remained European and with European, and specifically Jesuit, goals and values. Their self identity was formed insofar as it was formed against the identity of the Chinese, but it was not formed without the input of the Chinese themselves. As Jensen has noted, "the passages from Ricci, Mengzi, Yang Xiong, and Cheng Yichuan all admit of *the inventive role of the reader*."[7] All parties in the discussion interacted with the Confucian texts in a creative manner, manufacturing their own meaning as needed to deal with the given social situation. Ruggieri, Ricci, and other Jesuit missionaries to China engaged the texts of Kongzi in a serious manner alongside those doing likewise in the Hanlin Academy. This action allowed the Jesuits to become Chinese literati who could then reshape the texts as necessary. It is for this reason that manufacture is most appropriate: the Jesuits did not create Confucianism *ex nihilo*, but rather became bricoleurs; they manufactured Confucianism by assembling and rearranging disparate elements already existing in China through the work of their intellectual engagement with and Christian rereading of the texts.

Similar manufactured identities may be discerned in the work of missionaries elsewhere in the world. A particularly interesting case is that of Roberto De Nobili. As an Italian Jesuit like Ruggieri and Ricci, de Nobili sought to engage on the other's own terms those to whom he wished to bring the Gospel. To do so, de Nobili, like his brothers in China, became like the natives – de Nobili became a Brahmin through his experiences in Goa and Madurai. In order to justify his engagement with Hindu culture against those who saw his actions as heresy, de Nobili created a distinction that allowed him to fashion himself as *both* a Jesuit and a Brahmin. De Nobili divided all practices into those that were merely superstitious and those what were purely social, although they may have superstitious overtones or objectionable modes. In so doing, de Nobili relied on the type of ambiguity conveyed in Jensen's use of manufacture – the ambiguity between given and created. De Nobili reminded his readers that "in the use of any object, we should keep an eye on the specific end inherent in it, either of its own nature or by man's

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[4] Jensen, pg. 50.
[5] Jensen, pg. 42.
[6] Jensen, pg. 74.
[7] Jensen, pg. 110. *Emphasis mine*.

assignment."[8] Here de Nobili recognizes that some objects are essentially bound for some end, while more importantly, the ends of other objects and practices are constructed by human culture. The importance of the second recognition cannot be overstated with regards to de Nobili's project – this insight gave him the hope that he would be able to change the ends to which a given a practice is ordered, without necessarily altering the practice itself. While it is likely that de Nobili understood this in terms of the scholastic principle of transubstantiation, what he really was proposing was a transfinalization of Hindu practices. De Nobili himself states that "many practices which were gradually and in course of time to be eliminated should at first be tolerated, and that for the sake of suavity a good many could be transformed from superstitious ritual into sacred rites of a Christian tenor and complexion."[9] De Nobili did not seek to convert only souls, but to convert a culture.

In so doing, de Nobili laid out two criteria, both dependant upon an understanding of the ends to which a practice is ordered, in order to decide what elements may remain and what elements must be removed. In so doing, he is acting like a redactor, removing objectionable elements, keeping positive elements, rearranging them and producing a coherent whole that is a unique and newly manufactured text. This is the same process of manufacturing undertaken by Ruggieri and Ricci in China. In de Nobili's case, however, he had to make his case explicit as to the standards to be used in his new manufactory, which secured that his project would meet with the approval of the mission headquarters in Rome. As seen above, it is not simply that de Nobili created a hybrid Jesuit-Brahmin identity, but that he reworked the practices of both to be in conformity with the Christian message he intended for the Indians, thus making it appropriate to speak of his work as an act of manufacturing. It was only possible for de Nobili to do so because of the intense attention he devoted to the study of both Brahmin practices and Hindu sacred texts. Without this knowledge, he would have been unable to enter into their world and begin reshaping it.

This co-creation of identity did not occur only in the seventeenth century, nor only among Europe's most educated Italian Jesuits. A similar example of manufactured identity may be observed in the life of a nineteenth century African American missionary to the Congo, William Henry Sheppard. Pagan Kennedy, a biographer of Sheppard, claims that Sheppard entered

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[8] deNobili, pg. 211.
[9] deNobili, pg. 214.

missionary service because it was the only outlet through which he could live up to his dreams and potential, being an African American in the increasingly racist United States. Sheppard's missionary encounter is fraught with political intrigue of which he was unaware, but even in his personal life, Sheppard had been "twisted into a tortured compromise between two cultures."[10] While Kennedy seems to have given this a negative spin, it seems to me that Sheppard had a unique ability to not get caught between cultures, but rather to manufacture a new and interesting identity in the interstice between two cultures.

In his dealing with the Kuba, Kennedy notes that "Sheppard proved to be so deft a politician that he might have been able to take the throne, had he wanted to."[11] What this indicates is not a power hungry man, or even a missionary bent on converting as many souls as possible, but a human being capable of observing and understanding the intricacies of another's culture to such a degree that he was able to engage it. Sheppard's interaction with the Kuba was so profound that he was able to found a rival Kuba authority in the town of Ibanji. Ibanji was Sheppard's way to escape both the white world that had come to be transplanted at the missionary station in Luebo and the native power structures and witch hunts in the royal heart of Kubaland; Ibanji was Sheppard's grafting together of Kuba, African American, and Presbyterian cultures. Kennedy notes that Sheppard "seemed to be trying to capture all the charm of his home state without any of its nastiness and brutality."[12] Sheppard had manufactured not only a new identity as did Ricci and de Nobili, but he had constructed a place, Ibanji, where ex-princes of the Kuba, African American missionaries, and refugees of Belgian violence could all live peaceably together. This was not something entirely new to Sheppard. While at his first station in Luebo, a visitor had remarked that his "first impression was how faithfully the place and surroundings reflected the old Southern home life."[13] Sheppard held onto his southern roots, but fused them with his African flowering.

Africa allowed Sheppard to create a new identity. In Africa, Sheppard "had begun to regard race as mutable, a temporary state."[14] He saw the world of the white people who were placed over him, such as Lapsley and Morrison, at times frail, at other times welcoming. He eventually learned to converse with both Lapsley and the Kuba as equals, he learned how to be placed on

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[10] Kennedy, pg. 169.
[11] Kennedy, pg. 93.
[12] Kennedy, pg. 152.
[13] Kennedy, pg. 121.
[14] Kennedy, pg. 72.

trial as a challenge to authority, but also was accepted as Bope Mekabe, the returned chief of the Kuba. As Kennedy has noticed, "his survival depended on his ability to play-act, to go under a false identity."[15] Sheppard was not "a man caught between the nineteenth century and the twentieth, between white colonialism and black pride,"[16] but rather a man who could navigate the difficult streams of multiple places, manufacturing for himself a hybrid identity and constructing for others a hybrid society.

The metaphor Jensen has provided for explaining the missionary encounter, namely the manufacturing of a new identity and a new interpretation of received texts, both foreign and familiar, while extremely well suited to the cases of Ruggieri and Ricci, de Nobili, and Sheppard, is not the only such metaphor available. In Clifford Geertz's *Works and Lives*, the author argues that an anthropologist is one who can "convince us that what they say is a result of their having actually penetrated (or, if you prefer, been penetrated by) another form of life."[17] At the same time, the anthropologist must be able to bring this sense of having *been there* back into the context in which it can be published, presented, and understood – the act of *being here*. In much the same way, missionaries may not only be construed as manufacturers of identities, but may be seen as transitional beings, beings who can successfully cross back-and-forth between two distinct cultures, being able to operate in both. So the metaphor here may be drawn from Christological understandings, where Christ is both fully human and fully divine. In the same way, a missionary may be both fully Jesuit and fully Chinese or Brahmin. In this slightly less adequate metaphor, one is not manufacturing an identity as much as maintaining two distinct realms of interaction.

Jensen has provided a useful and deliberately ambiguous metaphor of manufacturing as the primary activity of the missionary. He sees the "reiterative invention of the concept *ru* and the communities represented by it throughout Chinese history, or the more recent multiple mutations of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism showing plainly that *tradition is a process of constant reinvention*."[18] The human condition is ambiguous, tradition is mutable, and "the creative impulses that have sustained centuries of invention,"[19] are no where more readily observable

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[15] Kennedy, pg. 100.
[16] Kennedy, pg. *xiii*.
[17] Clifford Geertz. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author.* Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988. Pg. 4.
[18] Jensen, pg. 25. *Emphasis mine*.
[19] Jensen, pg. 28.

than in the honest missionary encounters of Ruggieri and Ricci, de Nobili, and Sheppard who all infused Christianity with a new vitality through their sustaining manufacturing of traditions that are both new, yet contiguous with those of previous generations, not only Europeans, but of natives as well.