

## Fan Shouyi: The first Chinese person to tell of the West

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Many people are familiar with European missionaries like Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) who served as cultural bridges between China and the West. Not only

did they bring Western knowledge and Christianity to China, translating with Chinese literati important works of philosophy, theology and science. They also brought knowledge of China to the West, through letters, reports, books about China, and notably through their Latin translation of the Confucian books in the “Confucius Sinarum Philosophus” (1687).

In the last 30 years, scholarship has come to stress the role of Chinese individuals and local communities in this cultural transmission. I would like to highlight here the life and role of Fan Shouyi 樊守義 (1682–1753), a Chinese Christian who lived and studied in Europe for ten years (1708–1718), who became a priest in Europe and was the first Chinese person to write impressions of Europe and the Americas. With his double identity as a Chinese subject of the Emperor Kangxi and as a Jesuit priest, he made efforts to fulfill his religious and political duties at the difficult time of the rites controversy.<sup>1</sup>

## ***Fan Shouyi and his Family Background***

Fan Shouyi was born in 1682 in the city of Jiangzhou 絳州 (today Xinjiang 新絳) in the prefecture of Pingyang 平陽, in the southern part of the province of Shanxi 山西. Jiangzhou was the center for the evangelization of Shanxi and Shaanxi 陝西 provinces, and is associated with the work of the Italian Jesuit Alfonso Vagnone (1566–1640) who worked there from 1624 until his death in 1640.

Due to a lack of information about Fan’s family background and early life, it is often assumed that he converted to Christianity thanks to the Piedmontese Jesuit Antonio Provana (1662–1720).<sup>2</sup>

However, a Western report on the Chinese mission currently in the Archives of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (APF), in Rome, gives us precious information about his family, his Christian background and his early life.<sup>3</sup>

His father was a merchant but drowned while crossing a river. The father was not baptized but the mother was from an old Christian family of Jiangzhou

and thus Fan Shouyi was baptized quickly after his birth. Fate struck the family again when the widowed mother passed away only a few years after the death of Fan's father. So at the age of ten, Fan Shouyi was orphaned of both parents. He was entrusted to the care of his maternal uncles who also managed the wealth of the deceased father. The uncles were most probably Christian and so Fan Shouyi would have received Christian instruction alongside his formal education.

### ***Collaborator in the Mission in the Provinces***

According to the document of the APF, the two uncles asked the Piedmontese priest Filippo–Felice Carrocci (1646–1695) to take Fan Shouyi into his community and to take care of him. The document does not spell out the uncles' motivation; they may have discovered some good learning abilities in Fan Shouyi and decided to entrust him to a Jesuit priest. This may have happened around the year 1694 when Carrocci arrived in Jiangzhou.<sup>4</sup> The young Fan Shouyi, now 12 years old, could have maintained close connections with his family as they all lived in the same town.

In 1695, Carrocci, almost fifty, died, and Provana, a native of Nice (at that time belonging to the kingdom of Piedmont) arrived at Jiangzhou the next year to fill the position left vacant. He was then 36 years old, a mature man. But having spent only one year in China, he was still an infant in terms of Chinese knowledge. Because of the pressing needs of the mission, he did not go through the three years of studies of Chinese language and Confucian Classics, but was rushed to the apostolic field. He could speak basic Chinese, but probably he could not read and write it.

Provana found Fan Shouyi in the Jiangzhou church. He was then 14. As we shall see, they were to become collaborators and close friends for the following 25 years, until Provana's death in 1720.

The APF document mentions the roles of Fan Shouyi as translator, catechist and a companion of Provana in his missions. These covered a large area especially since he was entrusted in the years 1699 to 1701 with the three provinces of Shanxi, Shaanxi and Henan. Fan Shouyi had gained a good grasp

in Classical learning since he could explain to Provana references to the classical books that were often used by the Chinese literati.

In several towns, Provana built churches, while he repaired the church in Taiyuan that had been built by the Flemish Jesuit Michel Trigault (1602–1667).<sup>5</sup> Fan Shouyi would have assisted Provana in securing the needed permissions from the Chinese authorities, developing talents for negotiation that would prove to be very useful later on in his dealings with the courts of China and Europe.

### ***Work in the Capital***

In August 1705, Provana and Fan Shouyi left Shanxi and went to Beijing for some business related to the visit of the papal legate Maillard de Tournon (1668–1710).<sup>6</sup> Through the recommendation of the Piedmontese Jesuit Claudio Filippo Grimaldi (1638–1712), who had been named director of the Imperial Astronomical Bureau in 1688, Fan Shouyi was admitted to the bureau. According to a letter of the Jesuit Visitor Giovanni Laureati (1666–1727), Fan Shouyi held the position of junior clerk (“tianwensheng” 天文生). However, it seems that he had no special knowledge in the field of astronomy and Paul Rule suggests that this position was intended to give him legal status and protection.<sup>7</sup>

The visit of the papal legate, Maillard de Tournon to Beijing in 1705 did not bring satisfaction to Kangxi regarding the issue of the Chinese rites, and thus in 1706 Kangxi sent his own ambassadors to Rome, Antonio de Barros (1657–1708) and Antoine de Beauvillier (1657–1708). Alas, they died in a shipwreck in 1708 without completing their mission. Without any news from this first embassy, in 1708 he sent a second embassy consisting of Provana, Jose Ramon Arxo (1663–1711) and Francois Noel (1651–1729). The three Jesuits and Fan Shouyi sailed from Macao on January 14, 1708.

What was the precise role of Fan Shouyi in the embassy? Documents refer to him as a language secretary to Provana, but on arrival in Italy, he came to give Fan Shouyi a more prominent role as a witness in the rites controversy.<sup>8</sup> According to the document in the APF, Provana entrusted Fan Shouyi with a

box containing the imperial documents, which was covered with a yellow veil. The imperial documents numbered 69, consisting of copies of the original documents preserved in the imperial archives that Kangxi had himself examined and approved.<sup>9</sup>

## ***Stay in Europe***

After a stop at Salvador de Bahia, in Brazil, Provana and Fan Shouyi, on September 7, 1708, arrived at Lisbon where the king of Portugal Joao V (1689–1750) received them in audience. In February 1709, they arrived in Rome where Pope Clement XI (1649–1721) received them in audience. Provana's mission was very difficult since the pope had decided not to allow the Chinese rites and confirmed to Provana that Maillard de Tournon had acted in China in accordance with his instructions. Also, the pope considered that Provana did not have enough credentials to be received as an ambassador of Kangxi, and furthermore forbade Provana to return to China, at least until a new papal legate could be sent.

Fan Shouyi could have decided to return, but perhaps did not want to leave his mentor, Provana, in such a difficult situation. Also, Fan Shouyi felt at that time he had a vocation to join the Jesuits. He was now 27 years old and had already been living with them for 15 years. As we can read from his travel report, the "Shenjianlu" 身見錄 (Report about what I saw in person, 1721<sup>10</sup>), Fan Shouyi was quite impressed by Western civilization and by the cultural and social achievements of Christianity, in particular, its educational system, the libraries and universities. He also became more aware of Church politics, with different religious orders or congregations vying for influence, not always in an evangelical way. He was certainly aware that the Roman stance on the Chinese rites would bring many more difficulties for the Church in China.

On December 15, 1709, he joined the Jesuit novitiate in Rome.<sup>11</sup> The two years of novitiate would have meant a separation from Provana. From 1712 to 1714, Fan Shouyi studied Latin and philosophy in Milan, and from 1715 to 1717, theology in Turin. Through those six years of academic training, Fan

Shouyi would have been exposed to a wealth of philosophical and theological knowledge and would have gained a deep intellectual foundation for his Christian faith. During his studies in Milan and Turin, Provana was staying in those cities, though not necessarily in the same houses, and thus could have helped Fan Shouyi, making sure that he was ready for ordination to the priesthood in 1717.

The Red Manifesto of Kangxi arrived Rome in 1718, confirming that Kangxi had dispatched Provana as ambassador. Provana could not be retained any longer in Europe, and was finally allowed to return China. However, the pope did not entrust Provana with any mission but decided to send Carlo Ambrogio Mezzabarba (circa 1685–1741) as a new papal legate. In May 1719, Provana and Fan Shouyi sailed from Lisbon.

## ***Return to China***

On May 19, 1719, some 12 years after they had departed from Beijing, Provana and Fan Shouyi sailed from Lisbon back to China, but on March 15, 1720, Provana died at sea off the Cape of Good Hope. Fan Shouyi arrived in Macao on July 17, 1720. He regarded himself as the guardian of the body of Provana and as the executor of the mission that Provana had received from Kangxi. Though he had not received any official mandate either from the pope or from the emperor, he probably felt his duty was to serve the Church and China, and thought that he could help promoting the relationship between the two.

Even before the boat had landed in Macao, Chinese officials knew that it was carrying the body of Provana and that on board was a certain Fan Shouyi, disciple of Provana. The Chinese officers interviewed him in Macao and dispatched a report from Guangzhou to the court, mentioning that Fan Shouyi "had been in the service of Provana from his youth and so accompanied him in 1707."<sup>12</sup>

After a short stay of a week in Macao, Fan Shouyi moved to Guangzhou, bringing the body of Provana and some of his belongings. There he resided at the Jesuit Church. The officers interviewed him for a second time, and Fan

Shouyi gave more details about the mission of Provana in Rome, writing in his testimony that in Rome “[we] were received in audience by the Sovereign Pontiff; we explained in detail to the Sovereign Pontiff His Majesty’s decrees about Duoluo’s [Maillard de Tournon] arrival in China, his unwillingness to sanction the rites and his activities; when the Sovereign Pontiff heard all this, he clasped his hands and burst into tears; he said: ‘When did I ever bid Duoluo go to China and say such things and do such deeds?’”<sup>13</sup>

Though Clement XI would have backed up Maillard de Tournon on the issue of the Chinese rites, he may have expressed feelings of sadness and even anger at the way the legate had dealt with Kangxi. But more than anything else, the words of the pope as reported by Fan Shouyi tell us the psychological motivations of Fan Shouyi who strived to maintain the possibility of communication between Clement XI and Kangxi.

As much as Fan Shouyi was eager to carry out the mission of Provana, Kangxi himself was left without any news from the people he had dispatched to Europe. Indeed, de Barros and de Beauvollier had died at sea in January 1708, and Provana too, in March 1720, while Arxo and Noel were prevented from returning. Though Fan Shouyi had not been officially missioned by Kangxi, he was part of the imperial embassy and the only one left to report. Provana had made Fan Shouyi play in Europe the role of a Chinese witness, although without much success; now Fan Shouyi could become for Kangxi a Chinese witness with regard to Europe, and as we shall see, he had some influence on Kangxi.

When Fan Shouyi received the call to come to the court, he had to leave Provana’s coffin in the Jesuit church of Guangzhou next to the Western gate,<sup>14</sup> and it is only on December 17, 1722 that Provana was buried in a mausoleum in accordance with the instruction of Kangxi.<sup>15</sup>

Fan Shouyi departed Guangzhou on August 5, and arrived in October 1720 at Jehol, Kangxi’s summer residence. Fan Shouyi found himself in a difficult situation since he had to explain why Provana had delayed so long his return to China and about the position of the pope on the question of the Chinese rites. Fan Shouyi could not hide the fact that Rome had not entrusted

Provana with any official answer, but had chosen instead to send as legate Mezzabarba who was soon to arrive in China.

### ***Interpreter of the Court for the Mezzabarba Legation***

Fan Shouyi gained the trust of Kangxi who retained him as interpreter. From December 1720 to March 1721, Mezzabarba had several discussions with Kangxi's court officers, and he informed them that the pope had decided in his Constitution "Ex illa die" (1715) to forbid Chinese Catholics practicing rites to the ancestors, to Confucius and to the emperor.

While the Jesuits had always presented the pope as being revered by all the kings of Europe, Fan Shouyi indicated that the pope was of small importance in Europe as a temporal sovereign.<sup>16</sup> Thus, as Benjamin Elman writes, "a century of Jesuit portraits of the pope as emperor of the Church ("jiaohuang") had unraveled."<sup>17</sup>

Fan Shouyi's information may not have been a surprise to a ruler as astute as Kangxi. After all, though he himself was an absolute monarch, he knew perfectly the need to maintain order between the Manchu princes and the Han people. The knowledge about the relative weakness of papal authority may have influenced Kangxi in setting up more forcefully his policy towards the Catholic Church.

Though Fan Shouyi was suspected by the Mezzabarba legation and even by some fellow Jesuits of endangering the mission of the Church, he was in fact rendering a great service to both the Church and China. By telling the truth, he played a constructive role for mutual understanding.<sup>18</sup>

### ***The Cross and the Dragon***

After the failure of the Mezzabarba delegation, Fan Shouyi was active as a priest in North China. He died in 1753 and was buried in the Catholic cemetery of Zhalan, near to the tombs of Matteo Ricci and other fellow Jesuits. The inscription on his tombstone mentions his 33 years of service in



the mission and 44 years in the Society of Jesus. The design of the tombstone reflects his double identity, with the dragon symbolizing his loyalty to his country and the cross his Christian faith. In 1955, the Beijing Communist Party School took possession of Zhalan, and the tombstone of Fan Shouyi has become now a cultural relic under the protection of the Chinese state.<sup>19</sup>

## ***Illustration***

Inscription on the tombstone of Fan Shouyi, Zhalan cemetery, Beijing.

[Translation from Chinese:] Master Fan was called Shouyi and had the sobriquet Lihe. He was a native of Jiangzhou in the Shanxi Province. He died on the 26th day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month of the 18<sup>th</sup> year of the Qianlong reign (February 28, 1753) at the age of 71. He propagated the [holy] teachings for 33 years and lived in the Society for 44 years.

[Translation from Latin:] To God Most Good and Most Great. Father Louis Fan, a formed coadjutor of the Society of Jesus and a Chinese from the Province of Shanxi, entered the Society in Rome in 1709. After his return to China, he spent 33 years in the Mission. A tireless worker and a vigilant religious, he died in Beijing on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February, in the 71<sup>st</sup> year of his life, his 44<sup>th</sup> in the Society.

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1. The Chinese rites were acts of veneration toward Confucius, to the imperial family and to ancestors generally. They were judged initially to be irreconcilable with Christianity. See P. Rule: "Louis Fan Shouyi: a Missing Link in the Chinese Rites Controversy", in *Echanges Culturels et Religieux entre la Chine et l'Occident Actes du VIIe Colloque International de Sinologie de Chantilly, 1992*, San Francisco – Taipei – Paris, Ricci Institute, 1995, 277–294; Id. "Louis Fan Shouyi and Macao", in *Review of Culture* (Cultural Institute of Macao), No.21 (2nd series), October–December 1994, 249–258. Recently discovered documents are incorporated here.

2. See for example: S. Piastra, "The 'Shenjianlu' by Fan Shouyi Reconsidered: new Geo–Historical Notes", in *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 5 (2012) 41.
3. See Archivum Sacrae Congregationis De Propaganda Fide, *Informationum Liber Pro Missione Sinensi*, vol. 12, collectus anno 1713. Professor Rule graciously communicated to me the content of this precious document.
4. See J. Dehergne, *Repertoire des Jesuites de Chine de 1552 a 1800*, Rome, Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1973, 46; L. Pfister, *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur les jesuites de l'ancienne mission de Chine (1552–1773)*, Shanghai, Catholic Mission Publications, 1932–1943 (n. 414).
5. See L. Pfister, *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques*, cit., n. 205.
6. See J. Dehergne, *Repertoire*, cit., n. 665.
7. See P. A. Rule, "Louis Fan Shouyi and Macao", cit.
8. Letter from Fr. Provana to the Father General, Genoa, February 2, 1709; in Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (Arsi), F.G. 730.9; see P. A. Rule, "Louis Fan Shouyi and Macao", cit.
9. For a description of those documents, see A. S. Rosso, *Apostolic Legations to China of the Eighteenth Century*, South Pasadena, California, 179ff. Perkins, 1948, These documents were published in Italian translation in the *Atti Imperiali Autentici, di vari Trattati, passati nella Regia Corte di Pekino, tra l'imperatore della Cina, e M. Patriarca Antiocheno, al presente Sig. Cardinale di Tournon negli anni 1705, e 1706*, Nabu Press, 2013.
10. The "Shenjianlu," the first report on the West by a Chinese person, was not published in the lifetime of Fan Shouyi. Only in 1936 was a manuscript discovered by Wang Zhongming in the National Library in Rome (Ms. Or. 264/2). The Chinese text was published for the first time by the Catholic priest Fang Hao (1910–1980). *Zhongxi jiaotongshi* (History of the Communications between China and the West), Taipei, 1953. For the Italian translation see G. Bertuccioli, "Fan Shouyi e il suo viaggio in Occidente", in M. Fatica – F. D'Arelli

(eds), *La missione cattolica in Cina tra i secoli XVIII–XIX. Matteo Ripa e il Collegio dei Cinesi*, Naples, Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1999, 341–419.

11. See Arsi, Rome, 175:29v.

12. Document n. 2873, *Kangxichao hanwen zhupi zouzhe huibian* 康熙朝漢文朱批奏折彙編, Beijing, Dang'an chubanshe 檔案出版社, VIII, 702; see P. A. Rule, "Louis Fan Shouyi and Macao", cit.

13. A. S. Rosso, *Apostolic Legations to China of the Eighteenth Century*, cit., 333.

14. Letter of Giovanni Laureati to Generale Tamburrini, Peking, March 15, 1721; I. S. 174, ff. 038r (corpus P. Provanae honorifice delatum est ad nostrum Templum extra portam occidentalem).

15. The mausoleum was destroyed by some rebels in 1852-1853. See Z. Guillemin, *Tombeau du R. P. Provana de la Compagnie de Jesus, aux environs de Canton (Chine)*, Paris, 1875.

16. See *Anecdotes sur l'etat de la religion en Chine*, Paris 1734, vol.4, 108.

17. B.A. Elman, *On their own terms: Science in China, 1550–1900*, Cambridge (Ma) – London, Harvard University Press, 2005, 165.

18. Also, the Mezzabarba legation was offended because on several occasions Fan Shouyi, an ordinary priest "was seated well above the legate." But this was hardly surprising because Fan Shouyi had to sit with other court officers; see *Anecdotes sur l'etat de la religion en Chine*, cit., 103.

19. The journal of the Beijing Communist Party School published an article on Fan Shouyi: Wu Boya 吳伯雅, "Shen jian lu yu Hai guo wen jian lu zhi bi jiao" 《身見錄》与《海國聞見錄》之比較, in *Beijing xing zheng xue yuan xue bao* 北京行政學院學報 (Journal of Beijing administrative college), 2015: 113–119.

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