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Historical Consciousness in Lin Jinshui's Religious Studies and Preservation of Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

Professor Lin Jinshui's contributions to religious studies are distinguished by his rigorous use of archival research and foundational historical methods. His approach combines historical inference—guided by the principle of "seeing the big through the small"—with comparative analysis of historical figures and events, as well as psychological interpretation rooted in socio-historical contexts. He is deeply committed to correcting misreadings and restoring historical truth. Consistently, Professor Lin has examined religious issues through a historical lens. Beyond that, he skillfully employs interdisciplinary methods, particularly from linguistics and psychology, recognizing that religious studies are inherently cross-disciplinary in nature. In addition to his academic work, Professor Lin has devoted significant efforts to the preservation of historic architecture and materials. Drawing on his expertise in history, religion, and architecture, and through active engagement with local governments, he has played a crucial role in the successful and efficient preservation of numerous historic buildings in Fuzhou. His profound historical consciousness is evident in both his scholarly inquiries and his practical undertakings.

Keywords

Lin Jinshui; Religion studies; History; Architecture

Professor Lin Jinshui (1946-), with Fujian Normal University, is a well-known figure in the fields of Sino-foreign relations and the history of Christianity in China. Since the early years of China's reform and opening-up, he has garnered attention from Western academia and has been entrusted multiple times to speak on international religious forums, consistently advancing Sino-Western cultural exchange. He often applies historical methodologies to religious studies cases. While opinions on his research approach vary at home and abroad, this article presents his own perspectives through an interview.

Figure 1. Lin Jinshui in Naples, Italy, in 2009.

1. Studying Religious Issues through the Lens of Historical Methodology: Lin Jinshui on Innovation in Religious Studies

1.1 Archival Research and Basic Historical Methods

Lin Jinshui emphasizes the importance of combing through historical records to uncover overlooked aspects of history. For example, while many scholars know about the "Three Hills Academic Debate" between Ye Xianggao and Giulio Aleni in Fuzhou, few know the exact time and location. In his 2015 article "A Study of the Time and Place of the Three Hills Academic Debate between Giulio Aleni and Ye Xianggao", Lin examined Ye's writings and pinpointed the debate to June 17-29, 1627, held at Ye's former residence in Fuzhou—the Furong Garden in Zhuzifang. He argues that a deeper investigation into seemingly simple facts often yields new insights (Lin, 2015).

Historical narratives typically recount how someone arrived at a place. If such descriptions are absent, researchers should reconstruct and write them, even if they seem straightforward—this, too, is an act of archival recovery and academic innovation. While it is widely known that Aleni entered Fujian, Lin asked: When exactly did he reach Fuzhou? What route did he take? How did he travel from the upper Minjiang River to Fuzhou, and then from Fuzhou to Zhangzhou? Lin investigated these questions using official courier records and other historical documents to clarify previously overlooked details.

Another case is that many scholars know that Aleni gave a lecture on the concept of "human nature as the mandate of Heaven" at a certain academy in Fuzhou, but due to the abundance of academies during the late Ming, the exact site remained unknown. Lin first consulted local chronicles like *The Fuzhou Gazetteer* and *Gazetteer of Fujian Province* (《闽书》) to determine which academies existed in Fuzhou at the time, then examined their functions and concluded it was the Gongxue (共学) Academy. He further verified this by analyzing the connections between attendees and the academy, Aleni's associates and the institution, comparing Chinese academy rules with Western descriptions of the lecture, and examining the religious inclinations of academy head Luo Tianyu and the openness of Ming academies to outsiders. All evidence pointed to Gongxue Academy as the lecture site.

In his 2015 article "A Study of Giulio Aleni's Social Circles and Missionary Sites in Putian during the Late Ming", Lin used a similar method, cross-referencing local Fujian documents and poetry to determine that the "Wushan" where Aleni preached was the Wushi Mountain in Putian, and the "Xihu" was Putian's "Little West Lake," also known as Jinghu (Lin, 2015).

1.2 Historical Inference through "Seeing the Big from the Small"

Lin also employs what he calls a "micro-to-macro" historical inference method—understanding large-scale history through specific, often minute details. Macro and micro perspectives are dialectically unified and mutually transformative. In academic research, reconstructing the larger historical picture from micro-level facts is a form of innovation.

For instance, in his 2017 article "A Study of the Discovery of Late Ming Cross Stones in Quanzhou", Lin analyzed four cross-inscribed stones unearthed in Quanzhou to explore the spread of religion in the region. He argued that these stones provide archaeological evidence of Catholicism's dissemination during the Yuan dynasty in Quanzhou. Their discovery, along with preserved historical documents, reveals how the Maritime Silk Road brought religious and cultural diversity to Quanzhou during the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties (Lin, 2017).

Similarly, in his 2012 paper "On the Spread of Christianity in Fujian through the Lens of 'Poems Dedicated to Officials in Fujian'", Lin examined historical poetry to reconstruct the broader picture of Catholicism's development in Fujian and China, as well as the gentry's response to the religion. Through rigorous analysis and evidence-based reasoning, he drew valuable historical lessons from micro-level sources.

1.3 Comparative Analysis of Historical Figures and Events

Lin Jinshui believes that by examining and comparing historical events and figures—analyzing their similarities and differences—one can sometimes arrive at highly insightful and theoretically innovative conclusions. In his 2012 article "Exploring the Localization Process of Christianity in Fujian: From Giulio Aleni to Watchman Nee", Lin compares the Christian theology and doctrines spread by Aleni with the theological ideas and missionary strategies of Watchman Nee. He observes that Aleni adopted a theological stance that integrated and adapted to Chinese traditional culture to facilitate the spread of Christianity. Nee, on the other hand, did not seek theoretical support from

Chinese traditions as Aleni did but returned directly to the Bible, making his discourse arguably more grounded than that of Western missionaries. Although the two lived in vastly different historical contexts, their strategies of relying on foundational texts were strikingly similar.

1.4 Psychological Analysis within a Socio-historical Context

Psychological exploration based on the specific and credible historical background and individual identities is also a significant research approach. In his 1993 article "The Confucian Scholar-Bureaucrats and the Chinese-Western Rites Controversy in the Late Ming and Early Qing", Lin points out that Chinese Confucian elites who converted to Christianity lived with dual identities—both as believers and Confucian scholars. They often oscillated between Catholic theology and Confucian philosophy, walking a tightrope between religious faith and political career. For the sake of their careers, they had to uphold Confucian rituals as defenders of the Confucian way. Yet to defend their Christian beliefs, they regarded popular folk practices as heretical superstition. These conflicting demands led to a complex psychological state and a kind of double personality: they wanted Catholicism to spread widely in China, but also feared excessive Westernization of Chinese culture. Thus, they tried to reconcile Confucianism and Christianity, making them mutually dependent. This analysis offers deep insight into the psychological dilemmas and motivations of these Christian scholar-officials during the Rites Controversy (Lin, 1993).

1.5 Correcting Misinterpretations and Restoring Historical Truths

Another form of innovation lies in supplementing or correcting earlier academic views through rigorous historical investigation. Some scholars have claimed that adherents of Wang Yangming's School of Mind supported Jesuits such as Matteo Ricci. However, Lin Jinshui argues this is a partial misinterpretation. In late Ming Fujian, there was a Coastal Circuit Intendant named Shi Bangyao, a devout follower of Yangmingism who had reprinted *The Essential Teachings of Master Yangming*. Yet he was also the initiator of the "Fujian Coastal Circuit Proclamation," which stated:

"The Western barbarians, represented by Matteo Ricci, spread Catholicism and misled people with heterodox doctrines, causing chaos in China. The Chinese who follow these foreigners are using foreign religion to corrupt our sacred way, persistently committing evil, and are truly enemies of our moral order."

Shi thus issued an order:

"Notify the people: those who follow this religion shall be punished collectively by neighborhood; the foreigners must return to their countries; student believers shall be disciplined by the academies; and ordinary believers shall be instructed through community teachings."

This shows that not all followers of Yangmingism supported Ricci. Similarly, many had believed that members of the Donglin (东林) movement were generally friendly toward Catholicism, and that Giulio Aleni's missionary work in Fujian was facilitated by Donglin leader Ye Xianggao. But Shi Bangyao, himself a Donglin member, clearly opposed the Jesuits. Hence, historical attitudes are never absolute, and the exceptions often reveal intriguing underlying reasons.

For instance, Zhou Zhikui, a Fuzhou scholar and jinshi degree-holder, once had a personal friendship with Aleni and even wrote poems praising him. Later, however, he turned fiercely anti-Christian and co-authored critiques of Aleni. In the Preface to *the Collection Against Heresies* (Po Xie Ji Xu), he even argued:

"Those in power must not be lenient or evasive but should root out and exterminate Catholicism."

What explains this radical shift? Lin discovered that Zhou was originally a member of the Fushe（复社）literary society but came to believe that its leaders had harmed his personal interests. Thus, he began opposing Fushe. Since Fushe had close ties with Catholicism, Zhou also started vilifying Christianity as a way of attacking society. Lin's investigation of this case helps clarify that Zhou's anti-Christian stance was not merely about religious doctrine, but also rooted in personal grievances and psychological factors.

1.6 Interdisciplinary Innovation in Religious Studies

Religious studies are highly interdisciplinary, naturally connected to fields such as history, linguistics, and psychology. Appropriately drawing on these disciplines is essential to the field's development. For example, historical methods can be used to trace the development and transformation of a religion, mapping its rise and fall against broader socio-historical contexts. Linguistic methods allow us to examine missionaries' writings and translations to uncover

their theological thinking and religious concepts, and to explore how faith and cultural translation shape and reinforce each other.

As Professor Lin Jinshui stated, religious studies with Chinese characteristics must feature comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the complex relationship between Chinese society, history, and religion—past and present—and scientifically explain church-state relations. Its disciplinary system should be built through an interdisciplinary perspective, achieving true "interdisciplinary integration." This academic focus—open, interpenetrative, and inclusive—will endow religious studies in China with a distinctive and exceptional scholarly character.

2. Preservation of Historic Architecture and Materials

As a scholar of religious studies and a historian, Professor Lin Jinshui also made great efforts to preserve historic architecture and materials. In 1994, Lin Jinshui submitted a proposal to the Fuzhou government for the Restoration of the Tomb Site of Giulio Aleni, the Italian Missionary of the Late Ming Dynasty. He also helped establish friendly relations with the city of Brescia, Aleni's, birthplace. His proposal attracted the attention of relevant leaders. The Fuzhou Cultural Relics Bureau even dispatched personnel to investigate the site and took necessary protective measures. Today, Giulio Aleni's tomb is well-preserved in the Catholic cemetery at Lianhua, Beifeng. Fuzhou, Fujian, China (Lin, 2020).

In March 2001, Lin took charge of organizing over 500,000 Chinese characters' worth of first-hand recollections about the history of Christianity and Catholicism in Fujian. These were written primarily by clergy of the Fujian Christian Church and the Patriotic Catholic Association, or recorded with their assistance. These materials were hard to come by, and Lin adhered to the principle of preserving as much as possible, deleting only 13 accounts while keeping and organizing the rest. In total, 117 pieces were compiled into a single volume of about 450,000 characters, titled *Selected Cultural and Historical Materials: Christianity and Catholicism Section*, which was published by Fujian People's Publishing House in 2003 and provided extremely valuable materials for local religious studies (Lin, 2020).

In the late 1990s, Lin Jinshui and other scholars offered proposals to relevant departments on preserving the architectural integrity of the I-shaped building of Hwa Nan Women's College. Through a series of symposiums, they addressed the issue of planned demolitions involving the Trimble Hall and Magaw Memorial Hospital on both sides of Linghou Road. Magaw Memorial Hospital was founded in 1877, with a Western-style building worthy of preservation. The original design of the Sanxianzhou Bridge called for a straight extension from Linghou to Sancha Street, which would have required the demolition of both buildings for the sake of traffic flow and safety. In order to facilitate the construction while balancing heritage conservation, Lin Jinshui and other scholars evaluated the pros and cons of demolishing the two buildings, taking into account their different levels of cultural significance. They concluded that the I-shaped building of Hwa Nan Women's College should be preserved in its entirety and proposed slightly curving the original road alignment to the north, allowing for the demolition of Magaw Memorial Hospital instead. This proposal was accepted by the relevant authorities. As a result, the I-shaped building was preserved and in 2007 was officially protected to this day (Lin, 2025).

In 2009, Lin Jinshui submitted a proposal titled *On the Urgent Rescue and Preservation of Modern Buildings in Cangshan*. He suggested the government adopt a graded approach to heritage conservation and prohibit the arbitrary demolition of foreign-style buildings in Cangshan District. In January 2010, Lin further submitted a proposal titled *On Strengthening the Preservation and Rational Development of Modern Architecture in Fuzhou's Cangshan District*. Now among the 425 officially protected cultural heritage sites in Cangshan District, many are foreign buildings or Western-style residences, including the former sites of Church of the True God, the American Bible Society, the Methodist Church headquarters, the residence of Paul Claudel, British Consulate, Fujian Theological Seminary, Tahding Hospital of the Anglican Church, etc (Lin, 2025). These structures have been effectively protected with the long-time efforts of Professor Lin Jinshui. In both his theories and practice can be sensed a strong historical consciousness.

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