Xu Guangqi, “Proposals for Making Distinctions in Learning” (1616)

Note: Xu Guangqi (1562-1633) submitted this memorial to the Wanli emperor in 1616. Taken from his collected works, Xu Guangqi ji (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1984), vol. 2, pp. 431-36, and adapted from the translation in The Chinese Repository, vol. 9 pp. 118-126 (March 1850).

Xu Guangqi, guardian and tutor of the Imperial princes and chancellor of the National Academy, respectfully presents this memorial:

Knowing full well that the arts and sciences of the foreigners are in a high degree correct, Your Majesty’s humble minister earnestly begs Your Majesty in Your wisdom to issue a manifesto on their behalf, so as to render Your own Felicity eternal and bestow tranquility to ten thousand generations.

Your Majesty’s minister has seen in the Beijing Gazette the report of the Ministry of Rites impeaching Diego de Pantoja (1571-1618) and other of Your Majesty’s European envoys. That report says: “their doctrines are spreading widely, such that there are even eminent gentlemen who believe in them”; also, “although their discourses about astronomy are misguided, some scholars nonetheless have fallen into their fog.” . . . Your minister is one of the officials of the Imperial Court who have discoursed with the envoys on philosophy and may be counted among those who believe in the many books they have published. With them also I have investigated calendrical mathematics and my reports thereon have been laid before the Imperial throne.

. . . As Your minister has for years engaged in discussions and investigations with these envoys, I have become well acquainted with them. I know that not only they are in deportment and in heart wholly free from anything that could excite suspicion, but they are indeed followers of the sages and worthies. Their doctrines are most correct, their regimen most strict, their learning most extensive, their knowledge most subtle, their hearts most true, their views most steady. Among the people of their own nations, in their accomplishments they are one in a thousand, nay one in ten thousand. Now the reason of their coming thousands of miles eastward is because they heard that the teaching of the sages and worthies of China was to serve Heaven by the cultivation of personal virtue. Being teachers in their own countries who served the Lord of Heaven by the cultivating personal virtue, and knowing that there was a correspondence in principles, notwithstanding the difficulties and dangers by land and sea, they desired to give their seal to the truth so that all might become good and thereby realize Highest Heaven’s love to humankind.

According to their sayings, the service of the Highest Ruler is a prime duty; the protection of the body and the salvation of the soul are grand essentials; loyalty, filial piety, compassion, and love are the tasks to which one sets oneself; the reformation of errors and the practice of virtue are initiatory steps; and repentance and purification are the requisites for personal improvement. The true felicity of ascending to Heaven is the glorious reward of doing good, and the eternal misery of hell is the bitter recompense of doing evil. All their commands and injunctions are in the highest degree compatible with the principles of Heaven and human

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1 “Envoy” (peichen) refers to officials sent from a tributary state.
feelings. Their laws cause people to do good most earnestly and to depart from evil most completely, for what they say of the favor of the Lord of Heaven . . . is perfectly plain and strictly true; sufficient to move people’s hearts and to excite in them the love and confidence, the fear and dread, that naturally spring from internal rectitude. . . .

Those who suspect they make silver and gold, or that they are supported by the foreign merchants in Guangdong, are in error. Having voluntarily left their homes, and not engaging in any lucrative occupation, they are of course the recipients of what has been contributed. At present, however, their entire provision for food and clothing comes from donors in Europe; and in its transmission, by exposure to winds and waves, to robbers and pirates, much fails to reach its destination, thus causing them great distress. Yet during these twenty years since their arrival, they have not received from the people a single thing, a single coin. . . . Besides allowing to them a stipend as heretofore from Your Majesty's Court of Imperial Entertainments, let orders be given that these envoys may receive reasonable contributions from the Chinese for food and clothing, and let them be allowed to follow their own convenience, since, in their disinterestedness, they will never consent to receive aught beyond what is sufficient for their personal use. A sufficient support being thus provided, orders may be given that the foreign merchants at Guangdong forward no more presents, and that the money, which is sent on from Europe, on its reaching the custom-house, may be intercepted and returned. In this way all communication with Europe will be cut off and every suspicion removed.

. . . Should anyone hear rumours of their behaving in an irregular manner, let him bring accusations against them and require the magistrates to investigate the facts and search out the true circumstances of the case. Thus the practice of deceit will be impossible; and those who are true, and those who are hypocritical, will be brought out to view in their own characters.

. . . At the year’s end, let each magistrate carefully examine all [Chinese] who have followed these teachers. . . . Once in three years let there be a general examination; and let the magistrates and teachers freely commend all those who, having followed this religion, are not only free from all error and crime, but have made many and commendable advances in well doing. . . . Though the number of disciples be small, each in his own sphere will be useful. Moreover, should the Buddhists and Daoists ever raise disputes over religious doctrine, there will be no further necessity to concoct a scheme to deal with the issue, since all that will be needed will be to carefully evaluate the claim. . . .

. . . Only after years of careful examination and inquiry, when with sincerity I saw the truth in them and was able to understand them most thoroughly, have I grown confident of their teachings. Were there indeed the smallest reason for entertaining suspicion regarding these men, then there might be some shadow of doubt in Your minister's mind; and although free from the smallest fault, yet if these men were not truly sages and worthies, then. . . it would be of no importance to Your minister whether they were sent away or were retained. . . . Rashly presuming to approach your Heavenly Majesty, overwhelmed with infinite fear and dread, Your minister earnestly awaits the Imperial mandate in reply to this memorial.

Imperial endorsement: Noted.