

Biography of Giulio Aleni SJ, China missionary

Name and Name Modifications:

De Lenes

De Leni

Alenis

Chinese: Ai Rulüe

Relevance for the China mission:

Giulio Aleni was an important China missionary of the Jesuits' order. Because of his knowledge of Chinese culture, he received the name "Confucius from the West".

Dates of Birth and Death:

(*) 1582 in Brescia, part of the republic of Venice, today Italy

(†) 10. Juni 1649 in Yanping, China

Family Data:

Aleni was born into a family of lower nobility. The family moved from the province of Bergamo into the province of Brescia in the 13th century. Originally, their name was "De Boldinis", but as they came from the village of Leno nearby Brescia, they were called "a Lenis". At the time of Giulio's birth, the Counter-Reformation was strong in Brescia. Giulio was born in the parish of St. Maria Calchera in Brescia, but the registers were lost so that the exact date of his birth is not known. His mother's name was Francesca and she came from the noble family of the Ugoni.

Giulio Aleni joined the Society of Jesus in Novarella on the 1 of November 1600, but it was not easy then to be admitted.

Ordination was ca. in 1608.

Aleni made his four solemn vows (poverty, obedience, chastity and obedience to the Pope) in March or April 1624.

Education:

At first, Giulio received private education. With fifteen years, in 1597, he entered the Collegio San Antonio in Brescia, where he studied humanities till 1600.

During the time of his noviciate Aleni studied eagerly. In 1602 he was sent by his superiors to Parma to study philosophy. He stayed there till 1605. Then he taught at the college of the nobility in Bologna humanities for two years. He also read there the books of the famous astronomer and geographer Giovanni Antonio Magini (1555-1617), who was a professor for Astronomy at the University of Bologna, which was then one of the most famous universities in Europe. In December 1607, Aleni went to Rome to study theology. At the Collegio Romano there he also was a student of the famous astronomer and mathematician of the Jesuits, Christopher Clavius SJ (1537-1612), who was one of the organizers of the reform of the calendar initiated by Gregory XIII in 1582, and who was a friend of [Galileo Galilei](#) (1664-1642).

Mission:

Already in 1603, Aleni applied at the Jesuits general Claudio Aquaviva to be sent into the mission; the next “Indipetae” was on December 3, 1607. At first, Aleni wanted to go as a missionary to Peru (which was then much bigger than today), but was destined for the Far East. His wish was fulfilled after having studied for two years of theology.

Aleni’s start into the Far East was on March 23, 1609 via Portugal on the “Nossa Senhora da Piedade”; quite probably Aleni continued his studies on the long voyage on the ship and also made different astronomical observations.

At the end of 1610, he reached Goa, and in January 1611, he was in the Portuguese enclave Macau.

Professional Career:

In Macau, Aleni studied the Chinese language there and taught mathematics at the College of the Jesuits from 1611 till 1613. In 1612, he observed an eclipse of the moon in Macau, and one year later he reached the Chinese empire together with other Jesuits. At that time there were ca. 20 Jesuits in China. In the same year he came to Peking and then worked as a missionary in Kaifeng, where he came into contact with the last Jewish community in China thanks to his knowledge of the Hebrew language. Afterwards Aleni worked in Nanking and in Shanghai.

During the local persecution of Christians during the years 1616-1617, started by the Minister of Rites Shen Que (15??-1624), Aleni took together with other Jesuits refuge in the house of the well-known Christian scholar Michael Yang

Tingyun (1557-1627) in Hangzhou, where they found time to expand their knowledge of the Chinese literature. In 1617, the biggest residence of the Jesuits in China was in Hangzhou. Due to his better understanding of the Chinese language and literature Aleni could write several Chinese treatises about religious and scientific subjects. Further stations of his missionary work were Yangzhou, Hangzhou (1619) and Jiangzhou, where Aleni founded the mission of Shanxi. In 1620, Aleni taught a Chinese scholar named Ma Chengxiu in mathematics and European science and also baptized him. In 1623 Aleni went to Zhangshu and founded the Mission of Fujian in 1625. In 1639, he was expelled to Macau and in 1641 he became Vice-Provincial of the Jesuits mission in China.

During the conquer of China by the Manchus Aleni stayed in Yanping in the province of Fujian. Aleni belonged to those Jesuits, who stood at the side of the Ming pretender in Southern China. This was in contrast to his brethren in Peking, who worked for the new Manchu dynasty in the Astronomical Tribunal. In Southern China, Christian scholars regularly took notes of talks with Aleni and Andrius Rudamina SJ (1596-1631), which belong now to the most precious documents about life and missionary style in Christian parishes and show how accommodation worked.

For the Jesuit polymath [Athanasius Kircher](#) (1602-1680), Aleni made astronomical and magnetic observations. He also had a correspondence with the Italian astronomer A. G. Magini. Aleni belongs to the Jesuits of the second generation after [Matteo Ricci](#) SJ (1552-1610). His knowledge of the Chinese culture and language were so comprehensive that befriended Chinese scholars (among them also non-Christians) called him “the Scholar from the West”. He is also said to have drawn a very rare map of the world (Wanguo quantu = map of the ten thousand empires), basing on Matteo Ricci’s world map.

His Christian friends celebrated Aleni with several poems; besides that several Chinese biographies were published about him.

Publications Giulio Aleni:

Some of Aleni’s texts were published in: Nicolas Standaert, Ad Dudink (eds.), *Yesu hui Luoma dang an guan Ming Qing tian zhu jiao wen xian* (Chinese Christian texts from the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus), 12 vols. (Taipei 2002), and in: Nicolas Standaert, Ad Dudink, Nathalie Monnet (eds.), *Faguo guo jia tu shu guan Ming Qing tian zhu jiao wen xian. Di shi er ce* (Chinese Christian Texts from the National Library of France = Textes chrétiens chinois de la bibliothèque nationale de France) (Taipei

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- *Wanguo quantu* (Map of the ten thousand empires) (1623?).
- *Xixue fan* (The European sciences, “Generalità sulle Scienze Occidentali”), 1 juan (Hangzhou 1623; Fujian 1626), in: Li Zhizao (ed.), *Tianxue chuhan* (1628), then in: Wu Xiangxiang (ed.), *Tianxue chuhan*, vol. 1 (Taipei 1965) pp. 9-59.
- *Zhang Mige'er yiji* (Biography of Dr. Michael Zhang), 1 juan (after 1630).
- *Xingxue cushu* (Compendium of Psychology), 8 juan (Hangzhou 1624 written, printed in Fujian 1646; Shanghai 1827, 1873, 1922); s.a. Nicolas Standaert, Ad Dudink (eds.), *Yesu hui Luoma dang an guan Ming Qing tian zhu jiao wen xian* (Chinese Christian texts from the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus) vol. 6, # 26.
- *Sanshan lunxue ji* (Doctrine of the Three Mountains = Discussions of Fuzhou), 1 juan (Hangzhou, ca. 1627; Peking 1694; Shanghai 1847, 1923).
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- *Yang Qiyuan xiansheng chaoxing shiji* (Life of Dr. Yang Tingyun), 1 juan (nach 1627).
- *Yesu shengti daowen* (Litanies of the holy Eucharist) (at the end of Shengti yaoli) (ca. 1627).
- *Wanwu zhenyuan* (About the true origin of all things), 1 juan (Hangzhou 1628, 1694, 1791; Shanghai 1906, 1924), Manchu: *Tumen jaka-i unenggi sekiyen*, French: Hubert Otto (transl.), “Premier traité du “Tao Yuan Tsing Ts’oei”, Wan Ou Tchen Yuan, *Véritable Origine des Créatures*”, *Dossiers de la Commission Synodale, Peiping*, vol. VI (1933), n.6/7, pp. 813-817, 953-961, 1031-1048.

- *Misa jiyi* (The Holy Sacrament of Mass), 2 juan (Fuzhou 1629; Shanghai 1905), s.a. Nicolas Standaert, Ad Dudink, Nathalie Monnet (eds.), *Fa guo guo jia tu shu guan Ming Qing tian zhu jiao wen xian. Di shi er ce* (Chinese Christian Texts from the National Library of France = Textes chrétiens chinois de la bibliothèque nationale de France) (Taipei 2009), vol. 16, # 104.
- *Daxi Xitai Li xiansheng xingji* (Life of Fr. Matteo Ricci), 1 juan (Peking 1630 ?; 1919), French: L. Desbuquois (ed.), “Jules Aleni, *Matthieu Ricci*”, *Revue d’Histoire des Missions* 1 (1924) pp. 52-70; s.a. Nicolas Standaert, Ad Dudink (eds.), *Yesu hui Luoma dang an guan Ming Qing tian zhu jiao wen xian* (Chinese Christian texts from the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus), vol. 12, # 83.
- *Jihe yaofa* (Principles of Geometry), 4 juan (Fujian 1631).
- *Tianzhu jiangsheng yinyi* (Introduction into the Incarnation), 2 juan (1635), French: Hubert Otto (transl.), “Second Traité du “Tao Yuan Tsing Ts’oei”: Questions sur l’Incarnation”, *Dossiers de la Commission Synodale, Peiping*, vol. VII, n. 1 (1934) pp. 176-186, 230-239, 336-341, 489-497, 566-578.
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- *Tianzhu jiangsheng chuxiang jingjie* (Illustrated life of our Lord Jesus Christ), 1 juan (1637); s.a. Nicolas Standaert, Ad Dudink (eds.), *Yesu hui Luoma dang an guan Ming Qing tian zhu jiao wen xian* (Chinese Christian texts from the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus), vol. 3, # 14.
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- *Shengmeng ge* (also: Xing li pian) (Song of Saint Bernhard), 1 juan (1637?; Peking 1684), s.a. Nicolas Standaert, Ad Dudink (eds.), *Yesu hui Luoma dang an guan Ming Qing tian zhu jiao wen xian* (Chinese Christian texts from the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus), vol. 6, # 29.

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Author(s) of this contribution:

Claudia von Collani