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The Prolonged Path of Indigenization: A Study on German Protestant Missionary Ernst Faber's Chinese Literary Works

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Abstract: Ernst Faber's 34 years of literary missionary works reveal his commitment to refining his approach to indigenizing Christianity in China. Employing three linguistic and cultural adaptation strategies—translation and commentary of the Bible, examination and analysis of missionary practical outcomes in Western society, and the revision and reinterpretation of Chinese classics incorporating Christian insights—Faber adapted his methods gradually into China's specific conditions, indicating a prolonged path of indigenization. Despite expressing appreciation for Chinese culture, a critical examination reveals the preservation of his cultural biases and an unwavering commitment to Christianity as a means of purifying and enriching the spirit of the Chinese people. Rooted in the political context of his time and confidence in European historical world missions, Faber's indigenization strategy in his Chinese literary works represents an interplay of cultural adaptation and resistance.

Keywords: indigenization; German Protestant missionary; Chinese literary works; linguistic and cultural adaptation



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1. Introduction

Ernst F. L. Faber (1839–1899) is considered one of the most significant German missionaries in China. He possessed a high level of expertise in China's history, literature, and religions (Anonymous 1899, p. 581), making his literary work known worldwide. He brought honor to the German mission and even the entire mission. Few have enriched the whole Chinese mission as he did.¹ As Faber's mission in China progressed, an inclination toward indigenization became more evident, especially in his Chinese literary works. This paper aims to examine the manifestation of the prolonged path of indigenization within the context of Faber's Chinese literary missionary works and to evaluate its characteristics and impacts.

Scholars have had discussions in academic circles regarding the characteristics of Faber's works. For instance, Pfister (2002) specializes in cultural accommodation strategies employed by missionaries in China, whose efforts were to connect Protestant Christian doctrines with Chinese Confucian thought to facilitate the dissemination of Christianity, a strategy which Faber also employed. Isay (2001, 2017), in his works, explores Faber's choice of the Chinese concept of "Human Nature" as a pivotal point where East–West philosophical ideas converge, thereby providing a reasonable introduction to the concept of God. Zhang (2007) primarily examines Faber's works and thoughts, which integrate Christian doctrines with Chinese philosophical ideas. K. P. Wu (2022b) explores how Faber integrated concepts from Chinese culture into the Christian notion of "Chinese spirituality" while maintaining the values of Western missionaries.

Based on academic research into the characteristics of Faber's works, there has not been a thorough and systematic tracing of the indigenization aspect of his Chinese literary works, nor has there been an exploration of the development of indigenization. Furthermore, scholarly opinions on Faber's overall missionary work, which tend to focus on indigenization, also vary. A. Wu (2014), for example, cites Faber's negative assessment of his achievements in China and, on this basis, defines Faber's missionary activities as a "failure". In contrast, Duan (2022) summarizes Faber's literary missionary approach as "Confucius plus Jesus" and offers a positive evaluation. These contrasting assessments intensify the discussion framework regarding Faber's strategies for indigenization. In this article, the authors argue that throughout Faber's 34-year literary mission in China, he consistently employed experimentation with three strategies, characterized by three aspects, resulting in a prolonged path of indigenization. While it may be challenging to label his indigenization strategies as "successful" solely based on the direct conversion of believers, his efforts have nevertheless indirectly contributed to the development of Chinese Christianity in the long run.

2. Rethinking the Concept of "Indigenization"

In missionary studies, the term "indigenization" serves as a focal point for scholarly inquiry. By defining and framing indigenization, the practice of religion in missionary activities becomes interwoven with indigenous societies, where cultural adaptation plays an important role (Walls 1996; Bevans and Schroeder 2004, p. 31). Although the term "indigenization" has emerged relatively recently, the inherent concept of indigenization has long been present. It should be noted that the concept of indigenization emerged in both Protestantism and Catholicism, although in the Catholic context, "inculturation" or "accommodation" is more frequently used, while "indigenization" is a more common term in the Protestant. Regardless of the specific term employed, the concept typically encompasses three fundamental components: "(1) The translation of Christian terms into the local language (such as love, God, and salvation); (2) a strategic presentation of Christianity, whereby some elements are emphasized, and others marginalized; (3) an understanding of Christianity in the light of indigenous spirituality, culture, and faith" (Mase-Hasegawa 2008).

In the Catholic historical missionary context, Matteo Ricci was one of the Jesuits devoted to bridging the gap between Christianity and Chinese culture during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, which had a lasting impact on Chinese intellectuals and elites (Spence 1984). His approach to missionary work was characterized by "accommodation". Mungello (1989, p. 15) describes accommodation as the process by which Jesuit missionaries adapted Western learning to fit within the cultural framework of China, aiming to gain acceptance among Chinese literati through a synthesis of Confucian and Christian beliefs. Linguistically, Ricci mastered the Chinese language and engaged deeply with Confucian philosophy, allowing for a more nuanced communication of Christian doctrines (Ronan 1984). His collaboration with Chinese scholars resulted in the creation of works. One of them is the *Tianzhu shiyi* (天主實義, The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven), a seminal text that presented Christian doctrines in a manner accessible to the Chinese audience (Ferro 2019). This adaptive approach aimed at making Christianity more culturally palatable and resonant with the deeply ingrained Confucian and Daoist traditions among Chinese literati (Zürcher 1997). Ricci's efforts reflected a religious accommodation that allowed for blending cultural practices while maintaining the core tenets of the Christian faith (Standaert 1987). Nowadays, the Roman Catholic Church has consistently advocated for "accommodation" as its official policy (Considine 1961, pp. 59–75).

The discourse surrounding "indigenization" revolves around the establishment of autonomous indigenous churches. Initially debated within the developing missionary churches of Asia and Africa, its significance waned by the late 19th century due to the influence of European colonialism. Concurrently, nationalist movements in Asia and Africa emerged, advocating for indigenous expressions of Christianity and criticizing Western missions as "denationalizing" (Koschorke 2017). Discussions among indigenous Chris-

tian elites and liberal missionaries intensified after 1900, with figures like Francis Wei in 20th-century China pioneering theories of indigenization. Wei suggested that transforming Chinese culture with the Spirit of Christ could aid in the indigenization of Christianity, emphasizing an equal-status relationship between Eastern and Western cultures (Ng 2017). Duan (2022) presents a comprehensive framework delineating the indigenization of Christianity in modern China across three distinct periods: 1807–1922, 1922–1927, and 1927–2000. The study investigates the evolutionary trajectory of Christianity within the Chinese societal milieu, with a focus on cultural adaptation, the agency of Chinese Christians, historical context, religious syncretism, and the impact of missionary activities. Indigenization is a dynamic process that evolves across diverse temporal and contextual settings, showcasing varying focal points of discourse. While conversations frequently orbit around institutional or leadership dynamics within the church, the fundamental essence of indigenization remains constant: the indigenous cultural expression of Christianity in local contexts. In essence, indigenization encapsulates the endeavor to render the Gospel comprehensible within local communities' language and thought patterns, alongside the pursuit of establishing autonomous organizational frameworks within the church.

2.1. *The Choice of "Indigenization" in Ernst Faber's Chinese Literary Works*

The terms "accommodation", "inculturation", and "indigenization" all describe the interaction between gospel and culture. Yet, their usage can lead to confusion due to the differing philosophies of mission that employ them. In the study of Chinese literary works by Faber, the choice of terminology is a sensitive issue. However, we prefer to choose the term "indigenization" as the most appropriate. The reasons are as follows: firstly, "accommodation" and "indigenization" emphasize the perspective of those who are the 'givers' and "inculturation" highlights the perspective of the 'receiver' (Mase-Hasegawa 2008, p. 2), which is pertinent given Faber's role as the 'giver' in this context. Secondly, the authors delineate two sub-considerations explicitly pertaining to the distinction between "indigenization" and "accommodation":

- Faber himself gravitates towards the concept of "indigenization". In K. P. Wu's article, Faber critiques the Jesuits' accommodation strategy due to its inadequacy, suggesting that they had not delved deeply into indigenization (Wu 2018a). While Faber initially aligned with accommodation in his missionary efforts, his approach shifted over time towards indigenization (Isay 2006, pp. 265–66). It is worth noting that "accommodation" is viewed as an integral component within the framework of indigenization, serving as its initial step (Martin 1998, pp. 19–20). Moreover, indigenization is underscored as the comprehensive process through which the gospel becomes relevant to local culture (Martin 1998, p. 19).
- "Accommodation" and "indigenization" focus on different audiences, particularly within the context of comparing Jesuit accommodation with Faber's indigenization (details see following Section 5: Commentary on the Indigenization Tendency in Faber's Chinese Literary Works). The background of the term "accommodation" predominantly pertains to accommodating Chinese elites, akin to the Jesuits' approach of avoiding confrontation with Chinese authorities. Thus, "accommodation" also suggests subtle power dynamics within the Chinese societal hierarchy (Pfister 2002, p. 396²). However, Faber focused not primarily on the elites but on engaging with Chinese indigenous intellectuals and society. His study of the Chinese Classics exemplifies his commitment to engaging with the indigenous intellectual scene and advocating for reforms in Chinese society (Isay 2006, p. 266).

Hence, "indigenization" emphasizes proactive involvement with indigenous cultures, catering to a broader audience. Its depth and breadth surpass those of "accommodation". We believe Faber sought to advance an indigenous form of Christianity in China, aligning with the concept of "indigenization". An analysis of Faber's literary works shows not only a translation of theological concepts but also an intention to reinterpret and revise ideas within Chinese classics. It is also important to recognize that despite Faber's innovative

approach, the process of indigenization, as this article's title suggests, may consequently be 'prolonged'.

2.2. *The Application of "Indigenization" to Faber's Chinese Literary Works*

In examining Faber's literary works, the concept of indigenization becomes relevant, encompassing linguistic and cultural adaptation as crucial aspects. This involves translating fundamental theological concepts into the languages and cultural frameworks of the local people. Linguistic and cultural adaptation involve making Christianity intellectually and spiritually accessible within diverse cultural settings (Kraft 1997). Notably, this practice is nearly ubiquitous among missionaries who initially grapple with language barriers while operating in varied cultural contexts. Protestant missionaries in China such as Robert Morrison (Daily 2012), Karl Gützlaff (Lutz and Lutz 1996; Lutz 2000), James Legge (Lau 1994), Ernst Faber, Hudson Taylor (Wigram 2007), Young John Allen (Lu and Wang 2007), and Timothy Richard (Ng 2012, pp. 111–32) have, to varying extents, translated the Bible into Chinese, and all of their translations are characterized by indigenization. The Bible translation, an essential element of effective communication, features in indigenization efforts, mainly through linguistic adaptation that extends beyond mere linguistic conversion to encapsulate the core religious concepts within the Chinese culture (Covell 2004, p. 14). Y. Tang explores the indigenization of Christianity in China as a linguistic adaptation, suggesting a theoretical model comprising three levels—linguistic adoption, conceptual syncretism, and valuative complementation—to illustrate how Christianity undergoes indigenization within the Chinese context (Tang 1999).³ In addition to linguistic adaptation, incorporating indigenous cultural elements into missionary translations is essential. This involves a negotiation between preserving the core tenets of the missionary message and adapting to the cultural nuances of the host community (Lee 2011, p. 204; Walls 1996, p. 47). The indigenization of religious practices may encompass symbols and narratives that resonate more deeply with the local people (Kaplan 1995, p. 2). For instance, by mentioning elements closely related to the target audience, such as Confucianism, missionaries strive to establish a contextualized form of Christianity that aligns with the cultural fabric of the indigenous communities they aim to engage. In the forthcoming sections, the authors will scrutinize the specific strategies and aspects employed and exemplified in Faber's Chinese literary works to prolong the indigenization process.

3. Three Strategies in Faber's Chinese Literary Works

Faber regarded China as an independent empire (Faber 1881, p. 4) whose people had achieved a rich cultural and intellectual development (Faber 1870, pp. 226–27). This recognition shaped his perception of distinct modes of thought and expression prevailing in China compared to the Western context. The Chinese worldview was characterized by a sophisticated philosophical system, which also influenced the interpretation of Christianity. Faber observed that the Chinese comprehension of the Bible was still in its infancy (Faber 1882, p. 49). Despite the existence of accurate translations of theological literature into Chinese during that era, their impact remained limited primarily to mission schools. Therefore, Faber planned to write inspiring books to convey the Christian spirit to the Chinese in their language and through their means of expression (Faber 1882, pp. 49–50), aiming to facilitate a genuine understanding of the essence of Christianity. In pursuit of this objective, Faber adopted three dissemination strategies within his Chinese literary works.

3.1. *The First Strategy: Translation of and Commentary on the Bible for Preaching*

Faber was initially employed by the Rhenish Missionary Society (German: Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft, RMG) and served as a missionary in the southern region of Guangdong, China, from 1864 to 1880. Benefiting from the signing of the Treaty of Tientsin and the Convention of Peking, Western missionaries in mainland China had enjoyed recognition and protection from the Qing government since 1860 (Zhao 1995). This precarious

“peaceful” coexistence persisted until the end of 1883, concluding with the outbreak of the Sino-French War.

The initial phases of Sino-foreign interactions post the Opium Wars, although Christian incidents were frequent in Guangzhou, had a relatively limited impact, and they did not escalate into significant diplomatic conflicts between China and foreign nations. Influenced by various factors, including the local population, missionaries, churches, and local authorities in Guangdong, significant conflicts between China and the West did not escalate (Lin 2008, pp. 34–38). Therefore, during the RMG period, Faber found himself in a relatively stable and peaceful social environment, providing him with the foundational conditions to communicate closely with the Chinese people and conduct face-to-face missionary activities. As part of his duties, he delivered public sermons on Sundays at the Fumun Station (Faber 1882, p. 55). Recognizing the practical necessity for comprehensive and persuasive sermon texts, he published the work 馬可講義 (77 Sermons on the Gospel of Mark, *Make jiangyi*, abbreviated as *77 Sermons*), which gained popularity not only in China but also in Korea and Japan (Kranz 1901, p. 41). This work, a combination of translation and commentary, is a product of Faber’s eight-year missionary work, aimed at facilitating the Chinese comprehension of the Christian faith (Faber 1882, p. 56). It targeted not only educated Chinese people but also Chinese missionaries and preachers who sought guidance for public preaching. In the *77 Sermons*, Faber provides his interpretations for each topic, presenting outlines for public sermons and complete sermon texts. Commencing in 1875, Faber embarked on sporadic writing of 路加衍義 (Homiletic Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, *Lujia yanyi*, abbreviated as *Homiletic Commentary*), with the final part completed in 1892 and published in 1894 (Kranz 1901, p. 47). Similar in style to *77 Sermons*, this work encompasses both a translation of the Gospel of Luke and an interpretation, serving the purpose of preaching. *Homiletic Commentary* is structured around various themes to cater to the demands of preaching. Unlike *77 Sermons*, the *Homiletic Commentary* does not feature fully executed sermon texts for each theme. Instead, Faber provides outlines for the sermons, which he meticulously designs. Consequently, the *Homiletic Commentary* functions primarily as a written blueprint and was not actualized in practice by Faber.

Throughout his tenure with the RMG, Faber experienced a gradual reduction in his involvement in public preaching because of his throat ailment (Faber 1902, p. 22). Following his dismissal from the RMG and subsequent continuation as a freelance missionary in China, he no longer had a fixed location where he could preach. Upon joining the General Evangelical Protestant Missionary Society (German: Der Allgemeine Evangelisch-Protestantische Missionsverein, AEPMV) at a later stage, Faber redirected his focus primarily toward Chinese classics. This shift in emphasis can be attributed to the AEPMV seeing “the press in China as the only means adequate for spreading the truths of the Gospel to the entire (Chinese) people”.⁴ It is evident that Faber’s work gradually veered away from public preaching as he immersed himself further in the study of Chinese classics.

3.2. The Second Strategy: Examination and Analysis of Practical Missionary Outcomes in Western Society

The second strategy is manifested through two of Faber’s Chinese works: 德國學校論略 (A Brief Introduction to the Education in Germany, *Dequo xuexiao lunlüe*, abbreviated as *Education in Germany*) and 自西徂東 (Civilization, China and Christian, *Zixi cu dong*, abbreviated as *Civilization*).

Education in Germany was written during the RMG period. It provided a systematic portrayal of the German education system, encompassing both general and special education across various levels, such as primary schools, secondary schools, and universities (Faber 1873, Index). Faber explores diverse fields, including industry, agriculture, trade, shipping, art, music, and education. Notably, he underscores the significance of theology within the German educational framework, highlighting its presence in curricula or study programs (Faber 1873, vol. 1 5a).

Following an eleven-year endeavor, Faber completed his most renowned work, *Civilization*. The initial publication in Chinese took place between April 1881 and July 1883 in the periodical 萬國公報 (A Review of the Times, *Wanguo gongbao*). Subsequently, the first complete edition, consisting of 74 chapters, was printed in Hong Kong in 1884. Faber departed from the RMG to pursue independent missionary work in Hong Kong during this period. Devoid of the financial and material support provided by the missionary society, Faber found himself unable to partake in missionary activities like medical care, teaching, and missionary travels. Consequently, he redirected his efforts toward written work to contribute to the missionary cause in China. The work is organized into five volumes, with each volume representing one of the five fundamental concepts of Confucianism: Ren (仁, humanity), Yi (義, justice), Li (禮, propriety/etiquette), Zhi (智, knowledge), and Xin (信, trust/cooperative system) (Faber 2002, Index). Within this thematic framework, Faber examines the conditions of 19th-century China in comparison with the Western world (Faber 1902, p. 26).

Faber does not seek to impose Christian dogma upon the Chinese in this strategy. Instead, his objective is to illustrate the practical benefits and achievements of Christianity within Western societal life. He aims to resonate with the Chinese inclination toward practical results. He states, “The Chinese have little or no sense for theories and dogmas. Instead, they want to seek efficacy”.⁵ This statement emphasizes Faber’s recognition of the Chinese preference for practicality over theoretical abstract concepts. However, it is essential to adopt a critical perspective when considering Faber’s assessment, narrative, and impression of the Chinese here.

In September 1885, Faber joined the AEPMV (Hückel 1922, p. 17). In a letter from the chairman of AEPMV, Pastor Ernst Buß, to Faber in the same year, wrote, “You should be free to live out your convictions, continue to be effective as you have been as you see fit, and we will be pleased if you continued the literary and apologetic activity that you have initiated already” (Wu 2014, p. 22). Therefore, this collaboration was entirely based on a mutual agreement on the methods of missionary work in China. As a fledgling church, the AEPMV lacked sufficient funds to support Faber in undertaking public preaching, medical practices, and teaching in mission schools, among other missionary activities (Faber 1894, p. 58). Furthermore, due to the AEPMV’s emphasis on the literature of the mission target country (Buß 1886, p. 248), Faber’s inclination toward studying classical Chinese literature became more pronounced within the framework of literary missionary work. As his dedication to Chinese literary works intensified, Faber deliberately limited his social engagements and activities, prioritizing solitary research and writings. Occasional participation in conferences and gatherings served as opportunities for sporadic exchanges with scholars and missionaries (Faber 1887, p. 177). Consequently, his enthusiasm for and engagement with comprehending the contemporary situation in 19th-century China gradually waned, resulting in a diminished emphasis on his research into Chinese society and the suspension of the second strategy during his later tenure at the AEPMV.

3.3. The Third Strategy: Revision and Reinterpretation of Chinese Classics Incorporating Christian Insights

Faber’s third strategy focused on the integration of Christianity into Chinese classics and is exemplified through two of his works: 性海淵源 (Chinese Theories of Human Nature, *Xinghai yuanyuan*, abbreviated as *Human Nature*) and 經學不厭精 (Critique of Chinese Classics, *Jingxue buyan jing*, abbreviated as *Critique*)⁶.

During a mission conference in Shanghai in 1877, Faber was requested to work on the Chinese classics from a Christian perspective (Kranz 1901). At that point, he embarked upon a dedicated and relentless effort to prepare for the publication of these books. In his work *Human Nature*, Faber presents the theories of 31 Chinese philosophers concerning the concept of human nature and subjects them to critical analysis. Among these theories, he identifies the doctrine of innate human goodness (性本善, *Xingbenshan*) advocated by Mengzi⁷ as a potential connection point between Christianity and the Chinese clas-

sics. While Faber acknowledges certain aspects of Mengzi's doctrine, he also highlights its limitations, recognizing the need for supplementation and modification with Christian insights. Consequently, Faber attributes a central position to God within the elaborated Chinese classics, seeking to integrate Christianity into the ideological framework of the Chinese classics.

Through the work *Critique*, Faber facilitates a comprehensive examination of the moral thought system of Confucianism, approaching it from a Christian perspective. This work comprises five volumes. The first volume uses textual criticism of Chinese classics, meticulously analyzing their content and structure. The second volume delves into the central ideas presented in Confucian classics, explicitly focusing on the triadic concept of 天地人 (Heaven, Earth, and Man, *Tian, Di, Ren*), encompassing religious notions, the earthly realm, and moral principles. This volume assumes a significant role in Christianizing China, as Faber endeavors to harmonize the foundational tenets of Christianity with the Confucian concepts of "Heaven, Earth, and Man", aiming to provide solutions to societal challenges prevalent in China. The third and fourth volumes concentrate on textual criticism by utilizing Chinese classics and other ancient works as sources. Faber traces these sources to their origins, shedding light on prevailing philosophical and religious doctrines throughout Chinese history. Through this examination, he reconstructs Chinese history and offers critical assessments grounded in the principles espoused by Chinese classics.

The year 1883 marked the outbreak of the Sino-French War. The eruption of war fueled widespread collective animosity among the Chinese populace toward the foreign community, making missionary activities in China more difficult for Westerners.⁸ With such a societal backdrop, face-to-face missionary approaches became increasingly unsustainable due to low returns and high risks. Moreover, in 1885, Faber joined the AEPMV as part of a nascent missionary group. The AEPMV, subjectively (in terms of its mission directives) and objectively (due to limited financial capacity), leaned more toward the literary mission, especially the study of traditional Chinese classics. Consequently, Faber gradually inclined toward adopting the third strategy to propel missionary efforts in China.

Additionally, Faber's fervent and thorough engagement with Chinese classical doctrines fundamentally stemmed from his profound concern for the *quality* of Chinese converts, despite the significant number of conversions during that period. In a report, he emphasized, "The quantity does not matter, often proving to be a hindrance. What truly matters for the initiation and great progress of the mission is its quality".⁹ The number of converted Chinese dwindled as the material assistance provided by the missionary diminished (Faber 1884b, p. 8). This phenomenon underscored the need for Faber to address the root causes of such superficial conversions and to foster a deeper understanding and commitment to the Christian faith among the Chinese. Due to the deeply ingrained nature of Chinese philosophies and religions within the culture, mere baptism alone was insufficient for non-Christian local customs to be entirely abandoned; instead, such customs were only temporarily suppressed. Faber firmly believed that paganism needed to be spiritually overcome (Faber 1869, p. 100). Simultaneously, he placed particular emphasis on imparting the spirit of Christianity to the Chinese and internalizing it as part of their culture. He set the highest standard for missionaries to accomplish this goal, "The competence of a missionary should be shown by the extent to which the Chinese (cultural) essence/spirit has been personally embraced and transformed by Christian teachings".¹⁰ Faber pursued a reinterpretation of Chinese classics with Christian insights, implanting a Christian core into the existing Chinese thought system. In this manner, Faber critically viewed the content of the Chinese classics through the lens of Christianity, replacing elements with Christian messages to acquaint Chinese readers with the spirit of Christianity in a familiar way. Throughout his literary work, Faber honed his ability to empathize with the thinking patterns of the Chinese. This enabled him to adapt his literary strategies to the cultural needs of the Chinese, thereby engaging in a process of indigenization.

4. Aspects of the Prolonged Indigenization Process in Faber's Chinese Literary Works

Faber's extensive literary missionary work in China spanning 34 years exemplifies a prolonged process of indigenization characterized by the three strategies. Each of these strategies encompasses distinct aspects that contribute to this development process. The first aspect pertains to the engagement with Chinese classics, representing a shift in focus from translating and providing commentary on the Bible to incorporating Chinese classics. Faber sought to intertwine Christian teachings with the wisdom and insights found within the Chinese literary tradition. The second aspect involves the presentation of practical outcomes driven by the belief in the superiority of the West through Christianity. Here, the focus shifts from narrative representation to causal explanation, highlighting the transformative impact of Christian principles on Western society and aiming to convey this transformation to the Chinese audience. Finally, the third aspect represents the pinnacle of indigenization. In Faber's final work, *Critique*, he endeavored to challenge the Chinese moral system, seeking to provoke contemplation and reflection. This ambitious undertaking aims to shake established norms and foster a deeper integration of Christian values within the cultural fabric of Chinese society.

4.1. An Asymptotic Approach to the Chinese Classics: Interpreting Human Nature by Integrating Christian Concepts

In his pursuit of garnering acceptance for Christianity among the Chinese, Faber persistently maintained efforts to elucidate the fundamental importance of belief in God for individual morality throughout his works. As time progressed, he looked more deeply into the interpretation of human nature and articulated it within the framework of the Chinese classics. Faber's approach involved the integration of the Christian spirit into the Chinese context, achieved through incorporating Christian principles and teachings into the Chinese classics. He aimed to cultivate a harmonious synthesis of Christianity within China's cultural and philosophical sphere by bridging these two intellectual traditions.

In *77 Sermons*, Faber critically engages with Mengzi's doctrine of "the innate goodness of human nature", which significantly influences Chinese culture. During the Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD), Confucian scholars introduced the concept of 氣質¹¹ (physically endowed nature, *Qizhi*) to explain the distinction between sages and villains. They asserted that "those who possess purities in their *Qizhi* are considered virtuous and wise, while those with impurities are deemed foolish and unwise".¹² However, Faber recognizes the potential dangers inherent in this interpretation, as it could lead to moral issues with individuals attributing their faults and sins to the "imbalance of Heaven" (Faber 1874, Thema 8, 2b), thereby absolving themselves of personal responsibility. Faber introduces the concept of the *Heart* from a biblical standpoint to address this concern. He underscores the individual's responsibility for their actions (Faber 1874, Thema 8, 2b–3a), citing the verse from Genesis 8:21 (KJV): "[...] and the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth".¹³ By introducing the concept of the *Heart*, Faber seeks to strengthen the freedom of each individual, emphasizing their capacity to discern and regulate their actions to the best of their abilities. Therefore, attributing all sins to Heaven was deemed inappropriate. Furthermore, Faber explains that the Bible highlights the distinction between the hearts of believers and unbelievers. While believers are called to let their minds guide their actions, unbelievers are driven by their own desires and cravings (Faber 1874, Thema 8, 3a). This difference is emphasized through the statement, "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, the just shall live by faith" (Romans 1:17, KJV). Thus, faith in God serves as the foundation of life for all Christians and as an acknowledgment of their moral values and traditions.

Faber's introduction of the concept of the *Heart* from the Bible into the context of the Chinese classics does not entail a negation of Mengzi's notion of the "innate goodness of human nature". Nonetheless, for Chinese readers, incorporating this concept can be perplexing due to the absence of a clear distinction between 心 (*Heart, Xin*) and 性 (*Nature,*

Xing) in the Chinese classics. Mengzi emphasized the inherent goodness within human nature and advocated for its nurturing. He likened this innate goodness to the four limbs of the human body, referred to as 四端之心 (the Heart of the Four Virtues, *Siduan zhixin*)¹⁴. Mengzi employed the analogy to demonstrate that goodness is as fundamental to human nature as the four limbs are to the human body. By equating goodness to the essential nature of the four limbs, Mengzi conveyed the inherent and fundamental aspect of human virtue. However, Mengzi's interpretation challenged Chinese readers to distinguish these two concepts as separate and distinct entities. In contrast, Faber seeks to utilize the biblical notion of the *Heart* to transform the Chinese understanding of human nature and elucidate the significance of faith in God. However, this approach did not resonate strongly with the Chinese audience. In his later works, Faber attempted to present the concept of the *Heart* in a way that aligned with Chinese sensibilities, facilitating the differentiation between *Heart* and *Nature* and promoting the development of the Chinese comprehension of human nature from a Christian perspective. Rather than directly referencing biblical verses, Faber seeks references to the *Heart* in Chinese classics, leading him to the concept of 存心养性 (preserving the heart/mind and nourishing the nature, *Cunxin yangxing*)¹⁵ mentioned in Mengzi's writings. Faber interpreted this concept as "the *Heart* is not determined, and the *Nature* is not fully developed". He emphasizes that the goodness in human nature can only be achieved through cultivating a good *Heart*. Faber acknowledges that the Chinese also recognize the susceptibility of the human *Heart* to the detrimental effects of desires, which can impact the *Heart* and, in the worst cases, lead to moral degeneration. To counteract this vulnerability, Faber explores two educational measures discussed by Chinese philosophers in 大学 (the Great Learning, *Da Xue*), 正心 (Zhengxin)¹⁶, and 慎独 (*Shendu*)¹⁷ in 中庸 (the Doctrine of the Mean, *Zhongyong*). These measures aim to purify the *Heart* and set it on the right path (Faber 1893, chp. Mengzi 6b). It becomes evident that the development of a virtuous character is an ongoing process achieved through progressive moral education.

In this context, Faber holds a viewpoint different from Mengzi's regarding the innate nature of human goodness. While Mengzi argued that goodness is inherent in human nature, Faber contends that goodness is acquired through the process of maturation within a social environment. To support his stance, Faber cites the example of children who are separated from their parents for extended periods, observing that they often struggle to exhibit respect toward their parents. He posits that respect for elders is indeed a learned behavior acquired through socialization and education. Expanding upon this perspective, Faber asserts that all five virtues associated with humanity—namely humanity, justice, propriety, wisdom, and trust—must be cultivated throughout one's lifetime (Faber 1893, chp. Mengzi 6b). According to Faber, these virtues are not innate but acquired through ongoing learning and personal growth. Consequently, Faber challenges the accuracy of Mengzi's position, maintaining that it does not fully align with the reality of human development and the acquisition of moral virtues.

Mengzi's teachings emphasize the inherently good human nature, while Xunzi¹⁸ advocates for the contrasting perspective of an inherently evil nature. The concept of *Nature* derived from God is not in line with Xunzi's doctrine of evil nature (Faber 1893, chp. Mengzi 6b–7a). However, this does not imply that Faber unequivocally supports Mengzi's position. He maintains that human nature originates in God and must be inherently good. Nevertheless, embracing Mengzi's doctrine would entail recognizing the ease with which external influences can corrupt this innate nature. The imposition of external instruction only subjects the inherently good nature to external forces. Moreover, Faber underscores the distinction between humans and animals or objects, asserting that this differentiation lies in their respective *Natures*. However, whether an individual acts in a human-like manner or as an animal or object depends on the personal decisions made within the *Heart*; Faber stresses in his writings that it is only when individuals recognize this aspect that the necessity of guiding them toward salvation through Jesus Christ becomes apparent (Faber 1893, chp. Mengzi 7a). In this way, Faber strikes a balance between the notions of good and evil in the Chinese classics by emphasizing the importance of seek-

ing God's assistance in enhancing one's moral character (Zhang 2007, p. 49). Faber offers a perspective that integrates both the recognition of human nature's inherent goodness and the recognition of the need for divine intervention to cultivate and refine moral qualities.

In *Critique*, Faber emphasizes God's divine assistance by elaborating on the teachings of human nature. Drawing upon a metaphor of a field and a seed, Faber elucidates the interplay between the *Heart* and *Nature*, "The *Heart* is like a field in which *Nature* exists as a seed. When this seed sprouts in the field, it spreads within the *Heart*".¹⁹ Thus, the *Heart* becomes the place where human nature grows, while *Nature* itself represents the essence of the *Heart*. Faber places notable importance on the understanding that *Nature* is a shared aspect among all human beings and emphasizes the crucial need to unfold and cultivate it fully. To illustrate this point, Faber aptly establishes a connection with the Chinese classics by referencing Mengzi, who described the complete unfolding of human nature as sowing barley seeds (Faber 1896b, chp. Man, sct. 1 3a). However, Faber accentuates that while human effort plays a significant role in the harvest, the essential nutrients from the earth and the nourishing rain from the sky cannot be replaced solely by human labor. These vital elements originate exclusively from the blessings bestowed by God. Therefore, Faber affirms that the complete unfolding of human nature must rely on God (Faber 1896b, chp. Man, sct. 1 2b–3a), emphasizing the indispensable reliance on divine intervention for human nature's full realization and development.

The question of the inherently good or evil nature, as presented by Mengzi and Xunzi, respectively, is addressed by Faber in a manner that underscores the reliance on God. According to Faber, this controversy exacerbates the incompatibility between good and evil. However, considering the Bible's teachings on human nature, this situation can be reconciled. Since humans are endowed with a divine essence, their innate nature is inherently good. Nevertheless, due to the Fall, humanity bears guilt, and there is a potential shift from the originally good nature to one that encompasses evil tendencies. Consequently, Faber regards Mengzi's doctrine of the inherently good nature as representative of the original phase that manifests itself from a person's birth. In contrast, Xunzi's doctrine views *Nature* as a subsequent phase emerging after the Fall. Faber believed that these two teachings complement each other in revealing the truth about human nature in relation to God (Faber 1896b, chp. Heaven, sct. 1 2a). In *Critique*, Faber explicitly points out the deficiencies found in the perspectives of Mengzi and Xunzi. Furthermore, he argues that God plays a crucial role in cultivating the *Heart* and nurturing human nature. Although Confucians made efforts in 自省 (self-reflection, *Zixing*) and 自修 (self-cultivation, *Zixiu*), Faber posits that these efforts alone are insufficient for the complete development of human nature. The unfolding of human nature can only be fully realized through the assistance of God. For this reason, he deemed a conversion to Christianity necessary.

Within the Chinese context, Faber engages in an analysis of human nature, approaching the Chinese classics in an asymptotic manner. He wrote the following:

The Chinese culture is a fact that we must consciously or unconsciously acknowledge, willingly or unwillingly. (...) It is necessary to go back to certain common fundamental concepts. If we have a truth that the Chinese also recognize as theirs, we can proceed from there and prove the errors as errors for their understanding.²⁰

His objective is to explore the potential compatibility between the Chinese classics and Christian doctrine, albeit without wholeheartedly embracing the entirety of the Chinese classics. He perceived them as a pathway to transform the Chinese literary canon using Christian values and principles, thereby fostering a deeper connection between these two realms of thought and belief.

However, it is crucial to critically examine Faber's approach to integrating Christian doctrine and the Chinese classics. While he aims to explore compatibility and foster a connection between them, his method remains asymptotic and falls short of wholeheartedly embracing the entirety of the Chinese classics. This limits the depth of understanding and appreciation for the rich cultural heritage embedded within the Chinese classics. Fur-

thermore, it is essential to consider the power dynamics at play in this convergence, as the integration of Christian values and principles into the Chinese literary canon inadvertently perpetuates a form of cultural imperialism, where the Christian framework becomes the dominant lens through which Chinese culture is interpreted and understood. An approach that embraces the diversity and complexity of Chinese and Christian traditions is necessary to foster a symbiotic relationship between these spiritual realms and avoid the potential marginalization or distortion of Chinese culture.

4.2. Transitioning from Narrativity to Causality: Examining the Superiority of the West and Christianity

In *Education in Germany*, Faber initially attempts to establish a link between the pre-eminence of Western nations and the Christian faith. Positioned as a representative of these values, he seeks to communicate Western advancements and tangible achievements to the Chinese audience, emphasizing his role as a missionary and focusing on theology, the Christian faith, and regular worship. This approach distinctly exemplifies the subjugation of colonized societies to the influence of the Christian faith, reminiscent of the initial education imparted to Western children, where “the children learn and understand the history of the Bible through the catechism”. Irrespective of school type or grade level, Faber consistently emphasizes the necessity of allocating dedicated time in the curriculum for Bible study (Faber 1873, vol. 1 3a, 3b, 4b; vol. 2 7a–7b). When introducing Western universities, Faber highlights “the faculty for the Bible Study”, denoting the theological faculty, and meticulously outlines its curriculum (Faber 1873, vol. 1 5b–6a). However, in *Education in Germany*, Faber does not explicitly establish causal connections between the superiority of the West and the Christian faith despite frequent mentions of Christianity. Moreover, there is an absence of references to the specific circumstances faced by China in the 19th century or the particular challenges it encountered during that period. However, these gaps served as focal points in Faber’s subsequent works, wherein he endeavors to shed further light on these aspects and apply his ideas to the unique context of China.

The focus on this approach reaches its pinnacle in the work *Civilization*. Faber directed his initial attention toward the state of Chinese society in the 19th century, presenting Western knowledge and advancements as a potential solution to China’s pressing need for reform. Social issues prevalent in China, including poverty, disease, marginalized groups, inadequate legal systems, and slavery, are addressed (Faber 2002, Index), and remedies from Western society are proposed. The overarching objective of this work was to demonstrate that the Qing government of China (Qing Dynasty: 1644–1912 AD) could embrace Western civilization. Through a comparative analysis between the East and the West, Chinese readers are swiftly exposed to pertinent information that caters to their practical requirements. By highlighting the perceived backwardness in Chinese society and showcasing the social challenges in the face of Western progress, Faber seeks to instill in the Chinese a sense of the West’s superiority in the realm of civilization. He advocates the acceptance of the Christian faith, particularly among those striving for social reform, as he believes it to be a critical factor contributing to the West’s advancement. However, this work falls short of providing a comprehensive examination of the causal connections between the Christian faith and the presumed superiority of the West. Instead, it primarily remains descriptive. For instance, in Chapter 28 on “Responsibilities of Officers”, Faber argues that Western officials display a notable absence of criminal acts due to their genuine commitment to God, adherence to law and morality, and ability to meet the trust and expectations of the nation and its people (Faber 2002, p. 91). Faber postulates the hypothesis that the divine faith of Western officials accounts for their ethical and moral conduct, suggesting that Chinese officials should rely on their belief in God to improve their moral behavior. However, a detailed and systematic analysis is lacking to uncover the specific mechanisms that underpin the relationship between this faith and the observed performance of officials. The extent to which different aspects of divine teachings serve a moral function and the influence of belief in God as conviction or practice remains unclear. Faber presumes that the positive

influence of the Christian faith on the ethical and moral conduct of Western officials can be observed, leading him to conclude that Christianity alone is responsible for all positive outcomes. However, such causal inferences are difficult to convince the stubborn and proud Chinese of, especially Chinese intellectuals. In traditional Chinese classics, there is a comprehensive systematic discussion on official morality. For instance, the 尚書·皋陶謨 (*Book of Documents: Counsels of Gaoyao*) records that Gaoyao proposed the “nine virtues” requirement for officials.²¹ In the 周禮·地官司徒 (*Rites of Zhou · Minister of Land Management and Educational Affairs*), the standards of official conduct are further elaborated with the “six virtues” (erudition, humanity, wisdom, righteousness, loyalty, harmony) and the “six behaviors” (filial piety, friendship, harmonizing with relatives, treating in-laws kindly, courageously taking on responsibilities, compassion for the common people).²² Moreover, within the Confucian discourse system, 修齊治平 (cultivating personal integrity and governing impartially, *Xiuqi zhiping*) and 成聖成賢 (achieving wisdom and excellence, *Chengsheng chengxian*) are widely regarded as the ultimate goals for Confucian scholars entering into officialdom (Meng 2020, p. 9). Consequently, it becomes challenging for Chinese readers to be convinced by Faber’s causal logic.

Faber makes another attempt to uncover quotes from Chinese classics attributed to renowned philosophers or rooted in historical stories. His intention is to underscore the imperative for comprehensive social reform in China. For instance, Faber draws upon 論語·鄉黨 (*The Analects · fellow villager or townsman, Lun Yu Xiang Dang*) by Confucius to urge the Chinese to pay attention to their eating hygiene (Faber 2002, p. 5). He also references the well-known Confucian concept of 格物致知 (putting all things into the correct conceptual grid, extending to the utmost one’s range of comprehension, *Gewu zhizhi*)²³, mentioned in the Chinese classic *Great Learning* (Faber 2002, pp. 147–48). By employing this concept, Faber aims to critique scholars of the late Qing Dynasty who primarily focused on literary aesthetics and linguistic analysis, neglecting the acquisition of practical knowledge. In his subsequent works, Faber increasingly integrates Chinese wisdom and literary works to admonish the Chinese people and encourage them to embrace reform.

This transformation becomes evident in *Critique*, wherein he shifts his focus from narratively depicting Western superiority to providing a systematic explanation of the superiority of the Christian spirit. In the chapter “Heaven”, he defines the essence of the Western world as the “principle of heaven”, with faith in God at the center of this principle (Faber 1896b, chp. Heaven, sct. 2 6a). In the chapter “Earth”, he emphasizes that the superiority of the West is founded on the principle of earth, specifically highlighting the theory of *Ge Wu Zhi Zhi* (Faber 1896b, chp. Earth, sct. 1 4a). He presents the societal issues prevalent in 19th-century China and proposes solutions based on the experiences of Western society. In the chapter “Man”, Faber examines the origin of human nature and the path to realizing humanity from a Christian perspective. In the concluding chapter “Heaven, Earth, and Man Are One”, Faber further argues for why Christianity empowers the West. He unites the three principles under the term “humanity” (Faber 1896b, chp. Man, sct. 24 133b), which is actualized through the grace of God. Thus, he wrote as follows:

Humanity is the inherent heart and true nature of a human being. In heaven, God’s heart bestows life upon humanity; on earth, it is the principle that sustains human life. Humanity is the natural principle that God has bestowed upon humanity to make them more akin to Himself.²⁴

In this way, Faber solidifies the affirmation of the superiority of the Christian spirit within the Chinese framework of three principles, “Heaven, Earth, and Man”. His affirmation of the superiority of the Christian spirit within the Chinese framework suggests an intertwining of religious and cultural ideologies. By aligning Christianity with the principles of “Heaven, Earth, and Man”, Faber implies a harmonization of Western Christianity with traditional Chinese cosmology. This connection reinforces the perception of Christianity as not only compatible with Chinese culture but also as a guiding force in shaping Chinese societal values. Thus, within the context of *Critique*, the elevated status of the West

can be interpreted as stemming from the perceived superiority of Christianity, illustrating a causal relationship between Western dominance and Christian influence in China.

Overall, in this aspect of indigenization process, Faber's efforts aim to shift from superficial narratives of Western progress, such as education and civilization, which initially attract Chinese audiences, towards establishing a causal connection between this progress and Christianity. Faber perceives that the Chinese people's understanding of practical issues far surpasses their understanding of Christian doctrines. Therefore, instead of merely emphasizing and disseminating the historical development of the Church in Western countries, conveying a social perspective on Christianity to the Chinese people is more aligned with their current needs (Faber 1882, pp. 51–52). To address the social reform needs in China at that time, Faber capitalizes on the opportunity to engage with topics that resonate with the interests of the Chinese. Faber's initial premise regarding Western superiority attributes it to Christianity, thereby reaching the core of Chinese thought. He achieves this transition by reflecting on a developing systematic cognitive process that influences, challenges, and reshapes Chinese perception, primarily driven by Confucianism. However, it is crucial to critically analyze the portrayal of Christianity as the sole driving force behind societal advancement. This perspective may inadvertently neglect the agency and contributions of non-Western cultures and religions, perpetuating an imbalanced power dynamic between the West and the rest of the world. Faber's analysis fails to fully recognize the complex interplay of cultural, religious, and historical factors that shape the progress of societies in China.

4.3. *The Culmination of Indigenization: Critique of Chinese Classics*

As early as 1882, Faber attempted to propose a literary missionary method based on the existing spiritual life of the Chinese in an article published in *Allgemeine Missionsschrift*. However, at that time, Faber expressed his frustration, saying, "I must admit that I am still far from reaching that level" (Faber 1882, p. 52). It remains evident that Faber harbored uncertainty regarding his proficiency in understanding Chinese spiritual life. However, his comprehension gradually evolved through his ongoing study of Chinese classics. It was not until the publication of *Critique* between 1896 and 1898 that Faber fully implemented this approach. *Critique* represents the culmination of indigenization among all of his Chinese literary works. In this work, Faber aims to disseminate Christianity among the Chinese by aligning it with practical knowledge that meets their needs, leveraging Confucian thought as a foundation deeply ingrained in Chinese spiritual life.

In the first volume of *Critique*, Faber meticulously compiles a long-overdue compendium for studying Chinese classical texts, providing annotations and engaging in textual criticism, which serves as a valuable resource for novice students. The "Earth" chapter of the second volume tackles a range of social issues in China, offering solutions informed by the experiences of Western countries that resonated with the progressive aspirations of Chinese intellectuals in the 19th century. Furthermore, *Critique* adheres to a thought process that aligns with the Chinese mode of expression. In the second volume, Faber delves into the essence of Chinese classics, drawing upon the Chinese stylistic structure built on the trinity of "Heaven, Earth, and Man". This deliberate approach renders his explanations accessible and relatable to readers influenced by the Chinese worldview, facilitating comprehension and acceptance of his ideas.

In his pursuit of unraveling the essence of Chinese classics, Faber strategically adopts the concept "Heaven, Earth, and Man" from Confucian philosophy. Faber skillfully employs Chinese expressions, modes of thinking, and citations from Chinese classics to fulfill his overarching mission: to convey the essence of Christianity to the Chinese population in a manner that resonates with their understanding, thereby liberating their minds from the sway of non-Christian religions and facilitating their wholehearted embrace of Christianity. With *Critique*, Faber consciously veered away from the direct transmission of Christian doctrine and biblical references. Instead, he embarked on the audacious endeavor of integrating the pure spirit of Christianity into the very core of Chinese classics. Faber explicitly

states, “My main task is the spiritual understanding, thorough integration, and revitalization of Chinese material with the Christian spirit”.²⁵ Thus, the work *Critique* represents a bold attempt by Faber to communicate the spirit of Christianity more agreeably and subtly to the Chinese while simultaneously posing challenges to the prevailing ethical and moral system in China, which could lead to potential appropriation and distortion of the original Chinese cultural and philosophical contexts. By selectively incorporating Chinese elements, there is a risk of blurring cultural identities and imposing Christian interpretations onto the Chinese.

5. Commentary on the Indigenization Tendency in Faber’s Chinese Literary Works

As seen above, Ernst Faber’s literary missionary work extends beyond translating the Bible into Chinese but incorporates innovative dimensions into the process. “This creativity arose precisely because missionaries were exploring ways to articulate and extend Christian theological issues in various kinds of Chinese linguistic media to different audiences. Some of these were both scholarly and revisionary in character [...]” (Pfister, pp. 395–96). Regardless of the target audience, whether Confucian scholars, intellectuals, or common people, missionaries need an in-depth understanding of the Chinese language, enabling them to use both oral and written forms flexibly. Since language serves as the carrier of ideas, some missionaries inevitably deal with the core of Chinese culture while translating texts. However, facing this cultural core, missionaries exhibit different attitudes. Some missionaries merely navigate around the core, making minor adjustments to language forms, while others boldly undertake significant revisions. Faber exemplifies the latter approach, with his focused audience of Confucian scholars.

In perusing Faber’s works, one can gather the impression that he employed a method akin to “Confucius plus Jesus” (Duan 2022; Hu 2012). There remains controversy surrounding whether Faber employed the “Confucius plus Jesus” method.²⁶ In our opinion, this method fails to adequately capture the characteristics of Faber’s missionary work in China because “plus” implies equality between the two components, which is not reflected in Faber’s literary works. In the context of Faber’s Chinese literary works, this addition is not an equation wherein both components hold equal weight. In contrast to the Jesuits, who placed Confucianism and Christianity on an equal footing, Faber tended to view Confucianism as somewhat deficient, elevating Jesus to a higher position. Despite his conviction that missionaries should personally embody Christian life as an example, he believed mission work would thrive by building on points of agreement between local cultures and Christian teachings. This approach involved listing areas of agreement and disagreement between Confucianism and Christianity, emphasizing Confucianism’s deficiency in understanding sin and the need for a savior (Faber 1872, pp. 68–70). Faber, known for his formidable Chinese language skills, was not known for showing deference to Chinese customs and cultural foundations.²⁷ In his German-language autobiography *Theorie und Praxis eines protestantischen Missionsars in China*, Faber was blunt:

After all, China has produced a diverse and abundant literature. Researching this literature and illuminating it with the spirit of Western culture is also a mission task. In order to overcome the perverse or degenerate Chinese spirit, it is necessary to grasp and clearly present the ideas of the entire Chinese literature, purified of all excesses and antiquated remnants, and then enriched by the more highly developed ideas from the West (...) the main task is to communicate the truths of salvation and to transform the Chinese through God’s spirit into children of God and heirs of eternal life.²⁸

Fundamentally, Faber aims to enhance and ‘purify’ the Chinese spirit with a Western one. The rationale behind Faber’s adoption of indigenization can be traced to the period in which he lived. Unlike the Jesuits, who had to collaborate closely with the Chinese imperial court and compromise with the authority, Faber was less influenced by imperial power (Wu 2018a). He lived during a time when the Qing government faced the looming threat of decline, with Western imperial ships and artillery intruding into China. Additionally,

benefiting from the prosperity and development of 19th-century Germany, Faber maintained an unwavering self-confidence in his perspective. In the 19th century, Germany underwent a transformative period marked by the emergence of German nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism (Sun 2001, p. 31). This had significant implications for German missionaries' work in China. As Germany sought to assert itself as a significant player on the global stage, missionaries became instruments of cultural and political influence, promoting German values, language, and Christianity in China. German missionaries also viewed their work through the lens of national pride. They saw it as a means of spreading German culture and ideals abroad, resulting in broader German nationalism. A. Wu remarked: "Faber, to the end of his life, remained ethnocentric, convinced of Europe's historical world mission, committed to discrediting and undermining the Confucian legacy. Despite his cosmopolitan experiences, he remained through and through a German nationalist. Faber died of dysentery in China, yearning to return home one day" (Wu 2016, pp. 293–94).

Although we agree with A. Wu's viewpoint that Faber's missionary efforts in China were consistently marked by German nationalism, we believe that Faber himself was not consistent in "discrediting and undermining the Confucian legacy". Instead, he gradually began to seek points of convergence between Christian doctrines and Chinese traditional concepts. "Faber moved confidently within a Confucian interpretive framework and was able to reinterpret it in a Christian sense using Confucian terminology" (Kuhlmann 2023, p. 46). Faber's reference to the Chinese Classics can be viewed as an approach to indigenization, as he endeavors to forge theological connections by interpreting Chinese works in a Christian context. As Faber's understanding and grasp of traditional Chinese thought and characteristics deepened, he underwent a self-adjustment, manifesting a transition in theological perspective from conservatism to liberalism.²⁹ Despite Faber's insistence on national pride and devoutness to Christian doctrine, his literary work inevitably exhibits a tendency toward indigenization because his experience in learning the Chinese language would naturally be influenced by its culture. Choosing concepts that align with one's own culture and beliefs, even if not fully adapting to them, constitutes a process of cross-cultural communication. R. Cook argues that indigenization involves a delicate balance, where missionaries navigate the challenges of maintaining doctrinal integrity while accommodating Chinese cultural and religious sensibilities (Cook 2021). Therefore, achieving true indigenization is an ambivalent process, demanding the delicate balance of maintaining selfhood while accommodating others. In essence, indigenization itself may be a pseudo-proposition. There is no genuine indigenization, or, achieving it requires arduous effort and time for seamless communication, especially in language, while preserving distinct ideological differences.

Furthermore, this paper does not perceive Faber's indigenization as a "failure" (Wu 2014). When examining the history of Christianity in China, the indigenizing effect brought about by Faber's literary missionary work runs deep. First, Faber's most influential work is *Civilization*, which introduced advanced ideas to the Chinese public and enlightened the intellectuals. From 1888 to 1911, *Civilization* had a total circulation of 54,000 copies, making it one of the most widely circulated books published by the Society for the Diffusion of Christian and General Knowledge among the Chinese (later the Christian Literature Society for China) (Yan 2004, p. 89). In early 1898, Emperor Guangxu bought 129 Western books, the first volume being *Civilization* (Xiong 2011, p. 320). The remarkable sales of *Civilization* can be seen as a successful promotion of Christianity, which significantly drew the attention of China's leadership and educated literati to the connection between Christianity and social development. This success laid a solid foundation for the positive image of Christianity in society.

Additionally, although it may be challenging to label Faber's indigenization strategy as "successful" based on a direct impact, it indirectly influenced the emergence of local Chinese churches in the 1920s. More specifically, the impact of Faber's indigenization strategy included nurturing local missionaries such as Wang Yuanshen (王元深), Hu

Xie'an (胡燮菴), and Wang Qianru (王謙如) (Wu 2018a, p. 63). Wang Qianru played a crucial role in promoting the gospel in China as a local Chinese missionary within the RMG. He demonstrated great enthusiasm for missionary work (Law 1968, pp. 64–65), significantly contributed to teaching at the Catechetical school in Guangdong, and cultivated local church students (Law 1968, pp. 57–58). In 1898, Wang Qianru moved to Hong Kong due to illness and observed that the members of the RMG residing there lacked church life. As a result, he took the initiative to establish the Chinese Rhenish Church in Hong Kong, which marked the foundation of the RMG in Hong Kong (Wu 2022a, p. 14). Furthermore, Feng Mianzhai (馮勉齋), who participated in the writing and coloring of *Civilization* (Faber 2002, Index p. 5), became a devoted Christian due to his close contact with and the influence of Faber. He subsequently relocated to Hong Kong and aided Rev. Ost, a missionary, in his sermons to non-Christians (German: Heidenpredigt) and in teaching at the church school (Faber 1884a, p. 96).

Faber also influenced later Western missionaries and sinologists. For example, he served as Richard Wilhelm's³⁰ initial sinology teacher, undeniably inspiring Wilhelm to explore classical philosophical literature from China (Tan 2016, p. 354). In the end, Wilhelm even made the transition from a devoted Christian missionary to a significant translator and sinologist (Wu 2023, p. 120). Significantly, Faber engaged to a certain extent with Confucianism while maintaining a core of Christian ideas, fostering cross-cultural exchanges between China and the West. Regardless of whether he accepted the core teachings of Confucianism, the linguistic and cultural adaption employed in his literary work itself embodied a form of liberalism. The liberal approach persisted in later Chinese missionary endeavors, extending its influence into the realm of Sino-Western cultural exchange to the extent that it partially influenced the Weimar-era German intellectuals' turn towards "Eastern wisdom". (Marchand 2013, p. 341). This period saw a surge in innovative orientalist scholarship, reflecting a cultural *zeitgeist* marked by a widespread fascination with the intellectual and cultural offerings of the East. Additionally, the rapid development of local churches in China during this period could also be linked to Ernst Faber. Without the efforts of Faber and other missionaries in indigenizing the local population, the subsequent modernization of Chinese churches might not have occurred. Entering the end of the 20th century, it had become increasingly reasonable for some missiologists, particularly those leaning towards the liberal side of the theological spectrum, to champion the notion of letting the world dictate the agenda and interpreting the signs of the times. This transition was spurred by engagements with diverse global religions and cultures, alongside encounters with emerging local expressions of Christianity, leading to a more profound exploration of historical and contemporary socio-political contexts (Pocock et al. 2005, p. 322).

6. Conclusions

Throughout his extensive 34-year literary missionary work in China, Faber demonstrated a persistent commitment to refining his approach. He believed that "the practical main task of the missionary is to present to the Chinese people the divine mission, the heavenly goal, in a way that Chinese people truly understand".³¹ To accomplish this, Faber employed various literary strategies, including translating and commenting on Christian texts, revising Chinese classics, presenting Western social advancements, and emphasizing the transformative power of Christianity in society. Notably, he continually adapted these strategies to suit the specific conditions and contexts of China, aiming to deepen the indigenization of Christianity in his Chinese works. Faber's strategy evolved alongside his deepening comprehension of the national circumstances, culture, classics, and thought systems in China. This dynamic approach resulted in different emphases across his literary endeavors, ultimately leading to a prolonged path of indigenization. Faber anticipated that Christianity in China would manifest its unique characteristics distinct from those of Germany, England, Russia, and Rome, as the inherent uniqueness of Chinese culture would emerge and contribute to its development (Faber 1879, p. 117).

In broad strokes, Faber’s literary endeavors epitomize an extensive process of integrating Christianity into the cultural fabric of China. On the one hand, his literary strategy for indigenization involved an asymptotic approach toward Chinese classics, progressing from a superficial use of Chinese concepts to interpret and translate the Bible to integrating key Christian concepts into the core of Chinese classics. On the other hand, Faber associated Western superiority with Christianity, and his strategy evolved to position Christianity as indispensable for Western progress and societal advancement in China. This shift entailed moving beyond superficial narratives of Western progress and instead attributing such progress directly to Christianity. However, close scrutiny of Faber’s works uncovers a persistent preservation of his own cultural biases and a steadfast reluctance to fully embrace the Chinese Confucian tradition. While Faber expressed an appreciation for Chinese culture and literature, his ultimate mission to purify and enrich the spirit of the Chinese people through Christianity was unwavering. His approach demonstrated his tendency to elevate Jesus above Confucianism. “Neither Faber’s study of comparative religion nor his affiliation with a self-styled ‘liberal’ mission induced him to stray from a relatively conservative, evangelical theological position” (Whitefield n.d.). Faber explicitly stated, “The task I have set for myself is no less than to imbue the entire intellectual life of the Chinese with the spirit of Christianity”.³² Embedded within Faber’s reluctance to fully submit to the Chinese Confucian tradition, grounded in the political context of his era and his unwavering belief in the historical mission of European Christianity, lay a fundamental contradiction in his identity. On the one hand, Faber endeavored to bridge cultural divides and facilitate the integration of Christian principles into the Chinese tradition. On the other hand, he grappled with the challenge of not surrendering the perceived superiority of Christianity. Nonetheless, Faber’s prolonged process of indigenization served as a starting point, initiating a far-reaching influence toward a more profound exchange between Eastern and Western cultures.

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Notes

- ¹ The original text: “(...), der nicht bloß der deutschen, sondern der gesamten evangelischen Mission zur Zierde gereicht und wie wenige die ganze chinesische Mission befruchtet hat—es ist D. Ernst Faber” (Hückel 1922, p. 15).
- ² In this article, Pfister argues that Ernst Faber and Timothy Richard adhere to accommodationist apologetics, but we respectfully disagree. Richard’s approach resembled Matteo Ricci’s, appealing to the upper class with Western advancements, adopting a top-down approach, while Faber pursued a bottom-up approach. Richard cultivated deep connections with government officials, akin to accommodation. He prioritized the Chinese elite, particularly those within the court (Chen 2022; Kuo 2020, pp. 97–107).
- ³ Tang’s model is seldom encountered in current research; it applies a systematic theory to probe into the indigenization process of literary analysis of Chinese Christian texts. It particularly emphasizes modifications and revisional aspects, a departure from the prevalent focus on specific Bible missionary translations found in most other literature.
- ⁴ The original text: “In China speziell halten wir die Presse geradezu für das einzige Mittel, das ausreichen kann, um die Wahrheiten des Evangeliums dem ganzen (chinesischen) Volke bekannt machen zu können.” (Buß 1886, p. 250).
- ⁵ The original text: “Der Chinese, wie er nun eben tatsächlich ist, hat wenig oder keinen Sinn für Theorien und Dogmen, er will Nutzen sehen” (Faber 1869, p. 98).
- ⁶ According to the original plan, the work comprised five volumes, of which Faber himself completed and published the first and second volumes in the period 1896–1898. After Faber’s death, the third and fourth volumes were published by his successor

- Paul Kranz. The fifth 終言功效 (Discussing Efficacy at the End, *Zhongyan gongxiao*) was unfortunately not completed (Hu 2015, p. 126).
- 7 Mengzi: 372?–289? BC, personal name Ke (軻). He was born a century after the death of Confucius, and lived to see the birth of Xunzi (313?–238 BC), the three of them constituting the founding triumvirate of what has been labeled by the Chinese tradition as the “Ru” and by western sinology as the “Confucian” school. In addition, there is a book called “Mengzi”, a collection of the sayings of Mengzi and the conversations that he had with the leaders of the states, his other contemporaries, and his disciples (Yao 2003, p. 421).
- 8 To learn about the conflict that arose between China and the West regarding religion during the Sino-French War, please refer to the following papers: Chen (1991, p. 135); Zhang et al. (1996, p. 707); Lin (2010).
- 9 The original text: “Die Quantität macht nichts, ist oft nur ein Hindernis. Eine gute Qualität ist für den Beginn und guten Fortgang der Mission die Hauptsache” (Faber 1870, p. 238).
- 10 The original text: “Die Tüchtigkeit des Missionars zeigt sich inwieweit das chinesische Wesen von ihm persönlich durchdrungen und evangelisch christlich verklärt worden ist” (Faber 1879, p. 115).
- 11 Qizhi was first proposed by Zhang Zai during the Northern Song Dynasty, from the chapter Zhengmeng-Chengming (正蒙·誠明): “形而後又有氣質之性，善反之則天地之性存焉。” In the following, the authors quote the explanation of Qizhi from Yao’s *Encyclopedia of Confucianism* to help readers in understanding Qizhi: “The ‘physically endowed nature’ of humankind is the opposite of the *ben ran zhi xing* (本然之性, original nature) or *tiandi zhi xing* (天地之性, nature of Heaven and Earth). It is that flesh-and-blood, physically concrete nature that, in the case of each person, assumes its form in an ‘after-Heaven’ (後天, *Houtian*) or a posteriori sequence. The original nature is produced from *li* (principle), it is pure and uniform throughout, and it is serenely unmoving. By contrast, the physically endowed nature is produced from *Qi* (material force), and its quality is wholly dependent upon the purity or turbidity, the translucence or opaqueness, or the dispersion or viscosity of the *Qi* from which it is made” (Yao 2003, pp. 493–94).
- 12 The original text: 孟子言：“人性皆善”。宋儒解謂有氣質之性，言氣稟有清有濁，得其清者為聖為賢，得其濁者為愚為不肖。(Faber 1874, Thema 8, 2b).
- 13 The original text: 聖經曰：“人自孩提，其心常懷惡念。” (Faber 1874, Thema 8, 2b).
- 14 *Si Duan*, sometimes translated as “four beginnings”, “four sprouts”, or “four germs”, refers to the innate moral tendencies of human nature. In the book of Mengzi, the *si duan* are given as follows: *ceyin zhi xin* 惻隱之心 (the heart/mind of compassion or pity), *xiuwu zhi xin* 羞惡之心 (the heart/mind of shame at evil), *cirang zhi xin* 辭讓之心 (the heart/ mind of respect or deference), and *shifei zhi xin* 是非之心 (the heart/mind of [discerning] right and wrong). These are the spontaneous “sprouts” of *ren, yi, li*, and *zhi*, respectively (Yao 2003, p. 572).
- 15 *Cun Xin Yang Xing* comes from Mengzi-Jinxin (孟子·盡心): “存其心，養其性，所以事天也。” In Yao’s *Encyclopedia*, *Cunxin yangxing* is translated as preserving the heart/mind and nourishing one’s nature. It refers to Mengzi’s method of self-cultivation and self-realization. What is preserved is the innate heart/mind (本心, *benxin*), while what is nourished is the original human nature (本性, *benxing*) (Yao 2003, p. 168).
- 16 *Zheng Xin* was first proposed by Dai Sheng during the Western Han Dynasty, from the chapter Liji-Daxue (禮記·大學): “欲正其心者，先誠其意。” In Yao’s *Encyclopedia*, *Zheng Xin* is translated as setting straight one’s mental faculties. Generally speaking, *Zheng Xin* is often used in conjunction with *Chengyi* (誠意, attaining a state of wholeness in one’s inner consciousness). The two levels of self-cultivation in the opening chapter of *Great Learning* encompass the inner dimensions of the perfecting of individual character (Yao 2003, p. 63).
- 17 *Shen Du* is translated as taking care when alone. The concept originally comes from the *Doctrine of the Mean*. In the Confucian system, *Shen Du* emphasizes the necessity to take care when alone, lest one become gradually accustomed to coarse thoughts and behaviors (Yao 2003, p. 543).
- 18 Xunzi is recognized as the third scholar in the Confucian lineage, following Confucius and Mengzi. Xunzi was the first Confucian to designate a textual canon to be used in moral cultivation. Along with the canon, he emphasized the fundamental role of the teacher in classical Confucian education. Xunzi also emphasized the importance of *xue* (學, learning or study) as opposed to *si* (思, reflection or introspection) in the process of moral cultivation. Given that Xunzi claimed that human nature is bad, it made sense to stress the importance of learning guided by a teacher who had already undergone the process of cultivation himself (Yao 2003, pp. 720–21).
- 19 The original text: 心如田，性如種，種生於田，性擴于心亦如是。(Faber 1896b, chp. Man, sct. 1 3a–3b).
- 20 The original text: „Die chinesische Cultur ist eine Thatsache, welche wir bewusst oder unbewusst mit Willen oder wider Willen anerkennen müssen. (...) Es ist eben nöthig bis auf bestimmte gemeinsame Grundbegriffe zurückzugehen. Haben wir eine Wahrheit, welche die Chinesen auch als die ihre anerkennen, so kann man sie von da aus weiter führen und die Irrthümer für ihr eigenes Verständnis als Irrthümer beweisen” (Faber 1870, p. 227).
- 21 The “nine virtues”: affability combined with dignity; mildness combined with firmness; bluntness combined with respectfulness; aptness for government combined with reverent caution; docility combined with boldness; straightforwardness combined with gentleness; an easy negligence combined with discrimination; boldness combined with sincerity; and valor combined with righ-

teousness. The original text: 寬而慤，柔而立，顯而恭，亂而敬，擾而毅，直而溫，簡而廉，剛而塞，強而義。彰厥有常，吉哉。 From: Chinese Text Project (n.d.). Last accessed 16 March 2024. <https://ctext.org/shang-shu/counsels-of-gao-yao/zhs?en=on>, translated by James Legge.

- 22 The original text: 以鄉三物教萬民而賓興之：一曰六德，知、仁、聖、義、忠、和；二曰六行，孝、友、睦、姻、任、恤。 From: Chinese Text Project (n.d.). Last accessed 16 March 2024. <https://ctext.org/rites-of-zhou/di-guan-si-tu/zhs#n36772>.
- 23 *Gewu zhizhi* was first proposed by Dai Sheng during the Western Han Dynasty, from the chapter Liji-Daxue (禮記·大學): “致知在格物，物格而後知至。” In Yao’s *Encyclopedia*, *Gewu zhizhi* is translated as “putting all things into the correct conceptual grid, extending to the utmost one’s range of comprehension. These two crucial phases of the process of Confucian cultivation represent both the deepest interiority of the attainment of self-perfection and, at the same time, the anchoring of the inner self within the fundamentally outward-directed context of seeking to fully grasp one’s place among all things in the world of objective reality” (Yao 2003, pp. 226–27).
- 24 The original text: 仁為人之本心，人之正性，在天為賜生之心，在人為有生之理。蓋仁實乃上帝所賦人本然之理，使之肖乎上帝。 (Faber 1896b, chp. Man, sct. 24 134b).
- 25 The original text: “Die geistige Verarbeitung, respektive Durchdringung und Belebung des chinesischen Materials mit christlichem Geist ist meine Hauptaufgabe” (Faber 1896a, p. 253).
- 26 Proponents such as S. Zhang and Duan asserted that Faber utilized this approach in his missionary work in China, while K. P. Wu (2018b, p. 333) in his Book Review of S. Zhang’s Monograph disagrees with this viewpoint.
- 27 Timothy Richard referred to Faber as “one of the profoundest students of Chinese literature” and a “weighty man of dry humor” (Wu 2014, p. 23).
- 28 The original text: “Immerhin hat China eine vielseitige und massenhafte Litteratur hervorgebracht. Diese zu erforschen und mit dem Geist der westlichen Kultur zu beleuchten, ist ebenfalls eine Aufgabe der Mission. Um das verkehrte oder entartete Chinesentum zu überwinden, gilt es, den Ideengehalt der gesamten chinesischen Litteratur zu erfassen und klar darzulegen, von allen Auswüchsen und altem Schutt gesäubert, dann aber zu ergänzen durch die im Westen höher entwickelten (...) die Hauptaufgabe ist, wie oben dargelegt wurde, die Mitteilung der Heilswahrheiten und Umgestaltung der Chinesen durch Gottes Geist zu Kindern Gottes und Erben des ewigen Lebens” (Faber 1902, p. 17).
- 29 In Duan’s work *The Indigenization of Christianity in China I*, Faber and his work *Civilization* are also discussed in the chapter “The liberal wing of foreign missionaries: Young J. Allen, Timothy Richard, and their endeavors” (Duan 2022, p. 60; Duan 2004, pp. 66–75).
- 30 Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930) was a German sinologist, theologian, and missionary known for his significant contributions to the understanding and translation of Chinese philosophical and religious texts. As a pastor in the Weimar Mission, Wilhelm arrived in China in May 1899, where he encountered fellow missionary Ernst Faber. Under Faber’s influence, Wilhelm studied the classical philosophical literature of China, marking the beginning of his exploration of Chinese thought.
- 31 The original text: “Die praktische Hauptaufgabe des Missionars ist, den Chinesen die göttliche Aufgabe, das himmlische Ziel, vorzuhalten und das in einer Weise, dass sie es wirklich begreifen” (Faber 1879, p. 116).
- 32 The original text: “Die Aufgabe, welche ich mir stellte, ist keine geringere, als das gesamte Geistesleben der Chinesen mit christlichen [sic] Geiste zu durchdringen” (Faber 1898, p. 122).

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