At first China welcomed Europeans. The Chinese view was that their civilization was superior and non-Chinese had been coming for centuries looking to acquire aspects of this superior culture. The Europeans, the Chinese believed, were just the latest of these visitors. What the Chinese discovered, however, was that these travelers were different. They believed their own civilization was better and brought technologically advanced goods to prove it. Moreover, they tried to convert the Chinese to Christianity, to Europeanize them, and to trade with them as equals. All this confused the Chinese court.

While the earliest Portuguese arrivals did not endear themselves to the Chinese, the Jesuits (particularly Matteo Ricci, who became an advisor to the Emperor) respected and incorporated Confucian practices into Christian belief in a strategy designed to make conversion to Christianity appealing to the Chinese elite. Other orders (the Dominicans, for example) opposed any dilution of Christian beliefs and the opposing factions contested their views in the Vatican. This struggle came to be known as the Rites Controversy which the Jesuits ultimately lost, leading to the expulsion of all missionaries from China.

This reading, by two of the more prominent American historians of China, John K. Fairbank and Ssu-yu Teng, explores how the Chinese officials met these early European challenges and what influences these Europeans left in their wake.

The first extensive cultural contact between China and Europe began near the end of the 16th century, when the Jesuit missionaries, in the wake of the Portuguese, reached China by sea. Their dual function is well known: they not only diffused Western ideas in China, including elements of mathematics, astronomy, geography, hydraulics, the calendar, and the manufacture of cannon, but they also introduced Chinese (particularly Confucian) ideas into Europe. The Jesuits found it easier to influence China’s science than her religion. Perceiving this, they used their scientific knowledge as a means of approach to Chinese scholars. Although a small number of their Chinese converts took part in the translation and compilation of religious and scientific books, the majority of the native scholars, entrenched in their ethnocentric cultural tradition, were not seriously affected by the new elements of Western thought.

…[T]he immediate Jesuit influence in China was through items of practical significance, such as cannon, the calendar, or Ricci’s map of the world. Why is so little trace of Christian doctrine to be found in the writings of Chinese scholars in the subsequent century? If this is to be explained by the fact that government suppression cut off contact and the relatively few professed converts had few successors, we still face the question why the minds of the non-Christian scholars were not more permanently influenced by Western knowledge or ideas. …

Opposition to the Jesuits and other Western missionaries was motivated partly by the xenophobic suspicion that foreigners were spies; partly by ethical scruples against Christian religious ceremonies which seemed contrary to Chinese customs such as the veneration of Heaven, ancestors and Confucius; and partly by professional jealousy, on the assumption that if Catholicism were to become prevalent in China, the decline of the doctrines of Confucius, Buddha, and Lao-tzu would damage the position of their protagonists.

The conservatives objected to Western scientific instruments, arguing that clocks were expensive but useless, that cannon could not annihilate enemies but usually bummed the gunners first, and that on Ricci’s map of the globe China was not in
the very center and was not large enough. They also objected to Western painting because it lacked forceful strokes. …

Behind all this condemnation of Western learning lay the basic political fact that the Manchu rulers of China could not tolerate the propagation of a foreign religion which asserted the spiritual supremacy of Rome over Peking. By 1640 Japan, under the Tokugawa, had proscribed Christianity and foreign contact (except for the Dutch in Nagasaki) as politically dangerous. In China by the end of the 17th century there were Catholic congregations in all but two of the provinces; the Roman Catholic faith was banned in the Yongzheng (Yungcheng) period (1723-1735). …

All in all, the residual influence of the Western technology made available to China through the early missionaries seems to have been rather slight. Even when present, it was seldom acknowledged. Meanwhile an anti-Western political tradition had become well established.