

MATTEO RICCI AND THE JESUIT MISSION  
IN CHINA 1583-1610

Caitlin Lu

Abstract

This essay considers the question: What strategies did Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) employ in his mission to spread Catholicism in China, and how effective were they? Matteo Ricci was an Italian Jesuit scholar and priest who entered China in 1583 to lead the Jesuit missionary movement. After mastering the Chinese language and the Confucian classics, he became the first foreigner allowed by the Ming Emperor into the Forbidden City in Peking. He died there in 1610 and was the first non-Chinese to be officially allowed burial in the capital city, an immense honor to this day. This essay will document Ricci's pioneering work in bridging Chinese and Western culture, critically analyze his strategy of evangelism, and conclude that while he largely failed in his proselytizing mission, his secular and spiritual works hold lasting significance in China and the outside world. They represent the highest form of scholarship, scientific exchange and cross-cultural understanding. In short, this remarkable East-West scholar succeeded in opening China to the West and vice-versa like no man has done before or after. His distinctively humanistic legacy endures four centuries after his death, as strongly in China as it does in Europe.

---

Caitlin Lu is a Junior at the Chinese International School in Hong Kong, where she wrote this paper for Mr. Christopher Caves' IB Higher Level History course in the 2010/2011 academic year.

## Introduction

Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) was a brilliant and learned Italian scholar-priest who led the Jesuit missionary movement in China at the end of the 16th century. He was a formidable pioneer, bridging Chinese and Western culture through Jesuit proselytism. Although he largely failed in his evangelical mission, his secular and spiritual works hold lasting significance in China and the outside world. A remarkable train of events inspired this astonishing man to leave Italy, serve in Goa and Macao, and spend the last quarter century of his life as Superior of the Jesuit mission in China. The path of his life, and his impact on the Eastern Hemisphere in particular, is fascinating to analyze.

The year 2010 marks the 400th anniversary of Ricci's death. Celebrations were held in Macerata, his birthplace, and in Rome, where Pope Benedict XVI hailed Ricci as "a Jesuit endowed with extraordinary cultural and intellectual gifts, and a daring and intelligent messenger of Christ's Gospel...in China."<sup>1</sup> The most elaborate festivities, however, took place across China: in Beijing, where he lived for the last decade of his life and is buried; and in Macao, Zhaoqing, Nanchang, Nanjing and Shanghai, places where he lived, worked and left an enduring legacy. Thousands of Chinese each year make the pilgrimage to the Zhalan Cemetery in Beijing to pay their respects to the man they call Li Madou Xi Tai, or "The Scholar from the West."<sup>2</sup>

The Chinese revere Matteo Ricci, and many consider him the foreigner who did the most to open up China to the Western world and vice-versa. In the fall of 2009, the official Xin Hua News Agency wrote that Ricci was "beloved by all Chinese—Catholics and non alike. He is a 'model of exchange between East and West'...a pioneer seeking a common basis for dialogue and scientific and cultural exchange. With his extraordinary, timeless cultural and theological talent, he indicated an alternative route of incorporation of culture and science for all."<sup>3</sup> Westerners similarly laud

his life and work. According to Sinologist Wolfgang Franke, Ricci was "the most outstanding cultural mediator between China and the West of all time."<sup>4</sup> Historian and Ricci biographer Jonathan Spence experienced Ricci's impact first-hand:

From the first moment I went to China as a student, the one Chinese name of a Westerner that I found recognized by everyone was Li Madou, Matteo Ricci. To say I was interested in Li Madou evoked smiles and nods all over China. This Italian Jesuit, who went to China in 1583, has a kind of special resonance in the hearts of the Chinese even now...a remarkable tribute to one particular missionary.<sup>5</sup>

As a testimony to his stature, Ricci became the first non-Chinese visitor to be allowed entry into the Forbidden City in 1601, by the Ming Emperor Wan Li. Wan Li was so impressed with Ricci's vast intellect and command of the Chinese classics that he provided lifelong housing and a generous stipend for Ricci and his mission. He then accorded Ricci the highest tribute by permitting his body to be buried in Peking, the first such honor for any foreigner.

Ricci's intellectual prowess and scholarly achievements are legendary. Schooled in the Jesuit tradition, he mastered mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, geography and cartography, in addition to the Catholic canon. He studied classical Chinese to the point where he could converse intelligently with the most accomplished Chinese scholars and literati, who formed the pinnacle of Ming Dynasty society. His command of Chinese was so great that he translated the Confucian classics, *The Four Books*, into Latin, and co-translated six books of Euclid's *Elements* into Chinese.<sup>6</sup> He devised the first Portuguese-Chinese dictionary, inventing his own system of romanization. He developed and taught a special mnemonic memory system, which enabled him to memorize voluminous amounts of information in Latin, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Chinese. In addition, he produced many world maps, some of enormous scale and complexity, with full annotations in Chinese. He did this intensive intellectual work while tirelessly endeavoring to spread Catholicism and the revelations of the Gospel across Confucian China.

## Education

Ricci was born to an affluent noble family in 1552 in Macerata, a town in central Italy overlooking the Adriatic. In 1572, he went to Rome to study law at the Jesuit Roman College. He came under the tutelage of three mentors, each a distinguished scholar who would have a lifelong influence on him. Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606) was master of novices and imbued Ricci with an appreciation for the importance of cultural sensitivity and adaptability. Ricci would later apply these principles with creativity and devotion to his mission in China. Christopher Clavius (1538-1612) was a noted German astronomer and mathematician in the movement to reform the Gregorian calendar. His seminal books on astronomy were used by missionaries for much of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Clavius inspired in Ricci a lifelong passion for mathematics and astronomy, which he would later use to great benefit in impressing Chinese scholars, mandarins and, ultimately, the Ming Emperor.<sup>7</sup> Roberto Bellarmino (1542-1621) was an Italian Jesuit Cardinal in Rome. His teachings on dogmatics and his revisionist catechisms made him one of the most influential Cardinals of the Catholic Church during that period. Under Bellarmino's tutelage, Ricci would develop the formidable apologetics skills of reason, persuasion and dialogue which would prove invaluable in his intellectual and spiritual interchanges with his Chinese counterparts.<sup>8</sup> Apprenticing under this trio of mentors gave Ricci the religious, scientific and intellectual foundation that would deeply impress the highest echelons of Chinese society—and ultimately open the doors to dialogue with the imperial court.

In 1577, Ricci was sent to the Portuguese mission in Goa to teach Latin and Greek. He was ordained priest in 1581, and stayed there for almost six years. In 1583, Valignano, by then head of the Jesuit mission for all of Asia, instructed him to go to Macao. His task was to assist Father Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607), the Superior of the mission in the Portuguese enclave, who had been struggling to gain entry into China. Ricci arrived in the middle of that year and promptly immersed himself in studying Chinese. As

a testament to his brilliance, he succeeded in mastering the language in a few years. Cambridge historian of science and Sinologist Joseph Needham considered Ricci “one of the most remarkable and brilliant men in history,” and noted the enormity of the task:<sup>9</sup>

There was of course the almost insuperable difficulty of language at a time when sinology hardly existed and no good dictionaries had been made.<sup>10</sup>

At the end of 1583, Ricci moved with Ruggieri to Zhaoqing, a small city near Canton where the Governor-General of Guangdong and Guangxi provinces had his official residence. Ricci would never again return to Europe or leave China.

## Historical Context

It is important to understand the historical, ecumenical, geopolitical and intellectual context of Ricci's entry into the Middle Kingdom, and how these factors impacted the nature of his mission. In Europe, the Counter Reformation had commenced four decades earlier with the Council of Trent (1545-1563). By 1583, the Catholic revival was in full force, most notably led by the Jesuit movement. The Society of Jesus, as the Jesuits were officially known, had been formed in 1540 by St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), a Spanish nobleman and former soldier. As disciplined and devoted as he was charismatic and organized, Loyola quickly established the Jesuit order as a quasi-military brotherhood, almost fanatical in their zeal to restore the reputation of the Catholic church and stem the Protestant tide. Beyond the monastic vows of poverty, chastity and absolute obedience, St. Ignatius placed great emphasis on careful selection, iron discipline and rigorous educational training for his members.<sup>11</sup>

St. Ignatius's overarching mission was to spread the Gospel of Catholicism into the new worlds being opened by the explorers, armadas and traders of Europe, and convert as many non-Christians as possible.<sup>12</sup> St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552), one of the Jesuits' more forceful founders, assumed responsibility for

spreading Catholicism in the Far Eastern dominions. After a brief sojourn in India, he settled in Japan and made some headway in converting non-Christians. In 1552, he determined that China held more importance to the evangelical cause, and proceeded to its southern coast. He died late that year on Shangchuan, an island off the coast of Guangdong, failing in his quest to enter the mainland. Before his death, however, he wrote several exhortations to the Jesuit leadership on the strategic importance of establishing a Catholic mission in China.<sup>13</sup>

In the late 1500s, the Mediterranean world was split by the economic, political and military rivalry between Portugal and Spain.<sup>14</sup> Each nation was trying to assert its dominion over the New World, mainly the central and southern Americas, and the territories to the east of the Mediterranean. The Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), mediated by Pope Alexander VI, divided this expanse longitudinally west of Africa at the Cape Verde Islands.<sup>15</sup> With the exception of the Philippine Islands, the Asian domains fell under the auspices of the Portuguese. Out of consideration for the Pope's peacemaking role, the Vatican missions in these territories were to receive safe haven from their Portuguese and Spanish settlers. The Jesuit missions in Asia toward the end of the century focused on Portuguese-controlled India, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and China. The rival Dominican and Franciscan missions used the Philippines, under Spanish protection, as their base to enter China. This rivalry was to cause much trouble for Ricci later on during the so-called Chinese Rites Controversy.

In China, the end of the 16th century marked the apex of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). Spence notes:

In the year AD 1600, the empire of China was the largest and most sophisticated of all the united realms on earth....the Ming Dynasty seemed at the height of its glory. Its achievements in culture and the arts were remarkable, urban and commercial life were spreading new levels of prosperity, while Chinese skills in printing and the manufacture of porcelain and silk exceeded anything that could be found in Europe at the time.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, the Chinese had for centuries considered themselves the Middle Kingdom, a civilization superior to all other societies,

and they were particularly dismissive of Europeans, whom they considered barbarians. Buccaneers Spanish and Portuguese traders only reinforced this stereotype through their behavior in coastal China. As Immanuel Hsu writes:

On the whole, foreign traders in China, who were mostly profit-seeking adventurers and uncouth men of little culture, made a poor show of themselves. Their violent and reckless conduct confirmed the Chinese view of foreigners as barbarians. They were not welcomed but tolerated.<sup>17</sup>

Ricci was entering a country whose rulers and people were leery of foreign evangelists and traders alike.

#### Intellectual and Religious Background

Intellectually, Europe stood at the dawn of the Age of Reason. Perhaps the greatest intellectual controversy involving the Catholic Church in the late 1500s was the debate between faith and science sparked by the Copernican revolution. Nicolas Copernicus's (1473-1543) heliocentric theory of the universe was blasted as heretical by Catholic doctrinaires. At the same time, pressures to reform the Julian calendar were intensifying, particularly given the need for dioceses around the Catholic world to coordinate festivals and rituals.<sup>18</sup> Events were leading to the trial of Galileo, who would be denounced just two decades later during the Roman Inquisition. The Gregorian calendar was officially adopted by Rome in 1582, just one year before Matteo Ricci embarked on his journey into China. Ricci, trained not only in the Catholic canon but also in mathematics, the physical sciences, astronomy and rhetoric, must have felt torn by these competing intellectual forces. Representing the best of the Jesuit apologetic tradition, he remained loyal to both the theological catechisms and the principles of rationalism, debate and scientific evidence.

Christianity in China can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907), with the arrival around 635 of the first missionaries from Persia (the so-called "Jinhjau") in the capital city of Chang-

an, or present day X'ian.<sup>19</sup> But there is little documented activity thereafter until the 13th century, when several Mongol tribes were thought to have adopted Nestorian Christianity.<sup>20</sup> There is also evidence of Papal representatives making contact with officials in the Yuan Dynasty capital of Khanbaliq, current-day Beijing.<sup>21</sup> In 1289, Franciscan friars from Europe initiated missionary work in China, often in tandem with the Nestorians. The Christian movement was halted, however, in 1369, when the incoming Ming rulers moved to expel all foreign influences, including Buddhism.<sup>22</sup>

### The Ricci Mission and Method

It was against this two centuries' void that Matteo Ricci set forth on his journey into China. His mission was clear: to determine and implement an effective strategy to evangelize the country and bring China into the Catholic realm.

As he was new to China, Ricci did not have a well-formulated strategy at the outset of his odyssey. He was influenced by the thinking of St. Ignatius and the practices of St. Francis Xavier. St. Ignatius advised his missionaries:

Show that you conform, as far as the Institute of the Society permits, to the customs of the people there....teach matters of faith and morals in a way that is accommodated to those people...without taking away from them anything in which they especially value, try to get them to accept the truths of Catholicism...do everything gently.<sup>23</sup>

Valignano, Ricci's longtime mentor, also had great influence on his thinking. All three emphasized the importance of respect, tolerance and pragmatic accommodation of local customs where necessary, so Ricci adopted a flexible, rather than doctrinaire approach.

After living in the southern city of Zhaoqing for two years and immersing himself in local life, Ricci decided on an evangelical strategy with four guiding principles: achieving linguistic and cultural mastery; focusing on how to influence the top echelons of Chinese society, rather than the masses; impressing Chinese

literati and officials with the science and technology of the West as a means to pique curiosity in and acceptance of Christianity; and finally, accommodating Chinese values, rituals and customs in an attempt to harmonize them with Christian teachings.<sup>24</sup>

These guiding principles became known as "The Ricci Method" and showed Ricci's informed, pragmatic and nuanced style. Ricci's strategies were also remarkably sensitive for the era. Undoubtedly, the historical, theological and intellectual context of the Counter Reformation (and its attendant primary mission of recapturing lay members), the emergence of the zealous Jesuit movement, the Church's ambivalence about yielding to science and adopting the Gregorian calendar, and St. Francis Xavier's dying wish to enter China, spurred Ricci to formulate and deploy a strategy which would best realize his mission's objectives. He would need to be pragmatic, given the opaque and complex nature of China. At the time, China was an insular, intensely proud and inherently conservative culture that prized intellectual accomplishment. Ricci realized that he would need to employ finesse, cultural sensitivity and accommodation along with intellectual "shock and awe" to gain trust, respect and ultimately acceptance by the powers in question.

Valignano's thinking formed the foundation for Ricci's initial guiding principle of linguistic mastery. The former's first official act upon arriving in Japan was to require all new missionaries to spend at least two years in intensive language study.<sup>25</sup> In China, he instructed the Jesuits to find the best teachers and learn to read, write and speak Chinese so as to "Sinicize" themselves rather than to "Portugalize" their converts:

The work of evangelization, of making Christians, should be carried on both in Peking and in the provinces...following the methods of pacific penetration and cultural adaptation. Europeanism is to be shunned.<sup>26</sup>

Valignano preferred to see progress in furthering Jesuit influence over blind adherence to Christian principles. His strategies stood in marked contrast to those of the Dominican and Franciscan missionaries, who pursued a more rigid, Eurocentric and less culturally sensitive approach to the conversion process.

Ricci's thoughtful method of linguistic immersion and acculturation was unique at the time in China. He understood that the bureaucratic and scholarly elite were largely suspicious of foreigners, whom they generally considered to be uncivilized and mercenary. He took on the role of learner rather than proselytizer, judiciously choosing to present Christ in Chinese terms and not in European ones.<sup>27</sup>

Ricci not only immersed himself in the study of Chinese, but he also adopted the dress of Buddhist clerics upon entering China. Probably inspired by Valignano and his experience in Japan, Ricci felt that this appearance would allow him and his companion Ruggieri to blend in as men of the spirit, rather than be seen as foreign aggressors.<sup>28</sup> He replaced this attire with the robes of the Confucian literati around 1595, when he modified his method to concentrate on influencing the top echelons of the elite.<sup>29</sup>

Ricci was politically savvy enough to realize that acceptance and approval at the highest level of Chinese society would greatly enhance his cause. This approach ran counter to the conventional evangelical method at the time, which was to attract the masses. He understood that China was a profoundly hierarchical society and that at the apex stood the Emperor. Accordingly, he worked hard to find ways to approach and influence Wan Li, the Ming Emperor. The basic assumption behind the strategy was that if the Emperor and his mandarins accepted Christianity, then conversion of the masses would follow in due course. Indeed, the Jesuits "dreamed of a new Constantine for China."<sup>30</sup> Ricci cleverly sent gifts to the Forbidden City, including beautiful Italian clocks, a clavichord, astronomical measuring devices and oil paintings to entice a meeting with the Wan Li Emperor.<sup>31</sup>

As noted, Ricci was a man of extraordinary intellectual versatility. It was his skill in cartography, however, that led him to Beijing and a direct contact with the ruler. Starting in 1584, Ricci created a series of sixteen world maps, all annotated in Chinese. The Western concept of a world map was alien to the Chinese at the time, who envisaged their country and its civilization as the Middle Kingdom that lay between Heaven and Earth. The rest of

the world's land and sea masses were of little concern to them. Typical indigenous maps of the time showed the 15 Chinese provinces surrounded by a small area of sea, with a seemingly random group of foreign countries often misidentified.<sup>32</sup> Ricci's maps opened Chinese eyes to the outside world. Building on his growing reputation as a memory expert, mathematician, astronomical genius and accomplished Confucian scholar, Ricci supervised the drawing and production of a series of large scale maps which accurately positioned the Middle Kingdom in relation to countries in Europe, the subcontinent, and the New World. As he noted in his diaries:

This was the most useful work that could be done at that time to dispose China to give credence to the things of our Holy Faith...their conception of the greatness of their country and of the insignificance of other lands made them so proud that the whole world seemed to them savage and barbarous compared with themselves.<sup>33</sup>

He astutely placed China in the center of his maps, and made sure to feature it larger than scale. He annotated his drawings with fascinating facts, figures and allegories about specific regions, particularly those important in Christian scriptures. This maneuver proved highly effective on two fronts: it piqued the interest of the Emperor and the Ming Court, resulting in an official invitation to visit the Forbidden City in 1601; and it allowed Ricci to insert into each map the location of Rome and the Holy Land, with stories, verses, psalms and other Church teachings to hint that behind the grandeur and beauty of the world lay the divine Christian God and his teachings.<sup>34</sup> He revealed the real significance of this endeavor in a journal entry: "Making the maps was not only an instrument of missionary strategy, but it involved a religious world view...Understanding the universe precisely scientifically means to know God and Creation."<sup>35</sup>

Ricci was also successful at impressing the top tier of the influential Confucian elite. The system of power and patronage at that time was meritocratic, centering on performance in grueling imperial civil service examinations. Excelling at these brought power, prestige and economic security. Examination success required mastery of the Confucian classics. The core curriculum

comprised “The Four Books of Confucianism” (*si shu*), namely *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Analects of Confucius*, and *The Book of Mencius*.<sup>36</sup> Mastering these texts involved rigorous rote memorization and regurgitation.

Ricci spotted an opportunity and shrewdly capitalized on his prodigious memory techniques. He made every effort to demonstrate his carefully developed mnemonic system, which he referred to as his “memory palace,” and was happy to impart this skill to the scholar-elites he wished to cultivate. According to Spence, “Ricci was able to recite long passages from Chinese texts after only a fleeting glance.”<sup>37</sup> Ricci noted in his diaries: “In order to increase their wonder, I began to recite the characters all by memory backwards in the same manner, beginning with the very last until reaching the first. By which they all became utterly astonished as if beside themselves.”<sup>38</sup>

During the Ming Dynasty, scholars sat imperial examinations on average once every three years. Eager prospective mandarins soon made their way in increasing numbers to Ricci’s door to acquire this key to scholastic and career advancement.

Beyond phenomenal memory techniques and dazzling world maps, Ricci enthusiastically showcased his formidable arsenal of intellectual ideas, teachings, scientific and rhetorical skills to demonstrate the sophistication and beauty of Western civilization. He participated in open debates with Confucian scholars, Taoist and Buddhist monks, and high officials, engaging these masters in themes ranging from science, mathematics and technology to ethics, theology and philosophy. In 1603, he published *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (*tianzhu shiyi*), a brilliant dialogue between a fictitious Chinese scholar (*zhongshi*) and his Western counterpart (*xishi*) in which the Chinese scholar is won over to the Westerner’s views on the existence of a Celestial God, Creation, and Christian ethics and teachings.<sup>39</sup> Ricci’s brilliance and humility attracted three renowned top scholars, Xu Guangqi, Li Zhicao and Yang Tingyun, who soon converted to Catholicism and became Ricci’s most trusted and influential disciples. They are known as the “Three Great Pillars of Chinese Catholicism.”<sup>40</sup>

Xu proved to be the most illustrious of these early converts. He was celebrated for having attained *jinshi*, the highest possible ranking in the imperial civil service examinations, and was a member of the elite Hanlin Academy, a very prestigious think-tank patronized by the Emperor.<sup>41</sup> Baptized by Ricci with the name Paul, Xu studied under Ricci from 1604 to 1607 before returning to his native Shanghai. There, he established the famous Xujiahui Church, literally meaning “Xu Family Church.” It stands today as a Shanghai landmark and still holds regular services. Among their many important collaborations, Xu and Ricci translated the first six books of Euclid’s *Elements of Geometry* into Chinese, further cementing both men’s sterling academic reputations.

Overall, the first three principles of the The Ricci Method proved highly effective. Ricci endeared himself to the literary elite as he slowly made his way from Zhaoqing in southern China and travelled north through the cities of Nanchang, Nanjing and Shanghai. He successfully established missions in each of these cities, although the number of Christian converts remained painfully small—less than 600 in the entire country in the year 1600, according to Jesuit mission estimates.<sup>42</sup> He achieved his greatest success when in 1601, after nearly two decades of relentless effort, he won an audience with the imperial court and was permitted entry into the Forbidden City. This invitation marked the first time any foreigner had penetrated the inner sanctum of the Chinese empire. It was at this point that Ricci began to implement his fourth principle, that of cultural accommodation. In the short run, his choice proved a highly successful addition to The Ricci Method. In the long run, however, cultural accommodation precipitated the Chinese Rites Controversy, which proved disastrous to his mission and the entire Catholic and Christian movement in China.

#### The Chinese Rites Controversy

Creatively adapting Valignano’s accommodation method, Ricci showed tolerance for the traditional Chinese rituals of an-

cestor worship and the veneration of Confucius. Ricci considered these practices to be civil rites and not religious ones, arguing that Confucianism was not a religion per se, but rather a code of ethics residing within the human person. He referred to it in his writings as governed by a form of “natural law.”<sup>43</sup> However, conservative elements within the Church, particularly the Dominicans and Franciscans who were also actively proselytizing in China, blasted this accommodation policy as a breach of Catholic orthodoxy. They argued that Confucian rites and rituals smacked of idolatry and paganism, and were wholly inconsistent with the notion of a Heavenly Father and Holy Spirit.<sup>44</sup> This dispute gave rise to the Chinese Rites Controversy, which was to consume the Papal office and the missionary movement for centuries to come.

The controversy centered on three issues: a semantic issue relating to whether the Chinese classical terms for “Heaven” (*tian shang*), “Master of Heaven” (*tian zhu*) and “Most High” (*shang di*) should, as Ricci advocated, also be construed to represent the Christian God; a procedural issue relating to whether Christians should prohibit ceremonies and rituals worshipping ancestors and venerating Confucius; and finally an interfaith issue relating to whether or not Chinese Christians should be allowed to participate in festivals honoring non-Christian deities.<sup>45</sup>

Ricci wrote elaborately and eloquently on all three topics, and provided several reasoned, nuanced and well-researched defenses of his positions. In his most celebrated Chinese book, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (*tianzhu shiyi*), he masterfully crafted a fictional dialogue between a Western scholar and his Chinese counterpart. The book was designed to harmonize the basic Christian tenets of Divinity, the Holy Trinity, redemption and eternal life with the essential concepts of Confucianism. However, the Dominicans and Franciscans were intransigent, and escalated the controversy all the way to the Vatican. Their missionaries, supported by rival Spanish colonial interests in the Philippines, approached evangelism in China in an uncompromising, Europeanist manner. They viewed non-Christian cultures as the work of the devil and tolerance of these cultures as a betrayal of Christian principles.<sup>46</sup> Dominican and Franciscan methods in every aspect

opposed the subtle, culturally sensitive, and integrative approach of St. Ignatius.

Notwithstanding this vehement attack on Ricci’s method, a succession of Popes did nothing following Ricci’s death to overturn the accommodation method in dealing with the Chinese rites issue. Jesuits continued to administer papally-approved Chinese rites, and also embraced ancestor worship and veneration of Confucius on the grounds that these practices were civic and not religious in nature. It was not until the time of Pope Clement XI (1700-1721) that the internecine dispute reached its most bitter—and ultimately destructive—turning point. In 1704, the Holy See issued an edict forbidding all missionaries in China from sanctioning Chinese rites; Clement XI reaffirmed this judgment in 1715.<sup>47</sup>

These actions proved disastrous not only to the Jesuit mission in China but to all Christian evangelism. Confused and angered by the Church’s internal dissension, and by mixed messages and loss of Chinese face, the Qing Kangxi Emperor ordered all missions closed in 1721 and Church officials banished.<sup>48</sup> Chinese Catholics were persecuted and books burned. This prohibition was to last for two centuries until Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) reversed Clement XI’s decrees in 1939.<sup>49</sup> But the Chinese Rites Controversy had already caused irreparable damage to the Jesuit and Catholic missions.

Ricci was finally vindicated by Pope John XXIII in 1958, when by decree in the encyclical *Princeps Pastorum* he declared that “Matteo Ricci would become the model of missionaries.”<sup>50</sup> But as historian Arnold Toynbee lamented, “Christianity had during Ricci’s time and after the chance to become a true world religion—but rejected it over internal squabbles over semantics and local customs. Never again would history present itself on such favorable terms.”<sup>51</sup> Had Ricci’s method of accommodation been embraced and supported by Rome, the religious history of China might well have been quite different.

## Conclusion

If judged by the metric of Catholic conversions, one might easily conclude that Ricci's mission in China was a failure. By 1600, after nearly two decades of effort, there were barely 600 Chinese Catholics on record and only five missions operating in the entire country.<sup>52</sup> By the time of Ricci's death another decade later, the number had grown to only 2,000.<sup>53</sup> This statistic compares with 17,000 converts to Catholicism in Taiwan, 300,000 in Japan, and 350,000 in the Philippines around the same period.<sup>54</sup>

The infighting that was precipitated by the Chinese Rites Controversy and which undermined the Catholic movement was certainly a major impediment to Ricci's efforts during his lifetime. However, by 1640, the total converts to Catholicism in China had grown to almost 70,000; by 1651, the number had reached 150,000.<sup>55</sup> By any measure, the Jesuit endeavors in China must be seen as having been highly successful over the longer run.

With the hindsight of four centuries, it is far easier to appreciate Ricci's immense significance. Chinese and Western thinkers hold him in equally high regard. Even the Chinese Communist Party respects Li Madou Xi Tai as "the greatest and least predatory of the culture bearers from the West."<sup>56</sup> He was the first Western scholar to immerse himself completely within local Chinese communities. In so doing, he became an accepted and admired member of the literary elite. He had considerable personal influence over the Emperor. He introduced European mathematics, science, philosophy and technology to the Chinese and likewise opened the West to the exquisite richness of Chinese civilization through his voluminous translations of key texts, poetry, his reflections on life in China, and his astounding maps of the world—with the Middle Kingdom, of course, at the center.

The obstacles Ricci faced were daunting, and included physical hardship, danger, loneliness, linguistic and cultural differences, xenophobia, and attacks by Dominican and Franciscan rivals. It was a testimony to his extraordinary will and intellect that

Ricci was able to overcome these hardships, to such a degree that many of his writings in Chinese are considered classics of Chinese literature, moral philosophy, mathematics and science.

Toynbee accords Ricci the highest place in Eastern and Western civilization, and frames his life's work in the larger Jesuit perspective:

The Jesuits' approach to their enterprise of propagating Christianity in China was so different and so promising in itself, and is so much to the point today, that our discussion of Asian peoples' encounter with the West would be incomplete if we did not take into consideration the line which the Jesuits in China and India opened out.<sup>57</sup>

In Beijing today, where Christianity is tightly controlled, there is a stunning monument to Ricci's legacy. In 1601, Emperor Wan Li issued an imperial decree bestowing upon Ricci the land and funds to erect a chapel and permanent residence in central Peking.<sup>58</sup> Built in 1605, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception (popularly known as the "South Cathedral") stands in the busy Wang Fu Jing district of the capital. Two tablets inside the east and west walls at the front of the cathedral were gifts from the Emperor himself, and bear tribute to Ricci's standing in late Ming China.<sup>59</sup>

Before Ricci's death, all Jesuit priests who died in China had to be carried to Macao for burial. Ricci was the first foreigner allowed to be buried in Peking. In a country where symbolism often speaks louder than words, Ricci's entombment in China is proof of the respect and reverence he is accorded to this day.

Father Luis Sequeira, former head of the Jesuit order in Macao, wrote poignantly about Ricci: "He showed respect for the other. His mission was to show the humanity of Christ and open the door to all, and not behave as in Europe, where people were killing each other over religion."<sup>60</sup>

Ricci's gentle, culturally embracing, nuanced and tolerant methods, embodying the ethos of St. Ignatius, stood in sharp contrast to the belligerent, arrogant and contemptuous disregard shown by many foreigners who followed in his footsteps. The history of Western interaction with China in the 17th, 18th, and

early 19th centuries is marked by predatory mercantilism, gunboat diplomacy, the opium trade, unequal treaties, and war. Rather than peaceful accommodation, mutual respect and inculturation, this epoch was characterized by colonial aggression, subjugation and humiliation.

Chinese memories are long, and the life and work of Matteo Ricci, the Scholar from the West, go some way to assuage the resentment Chinese people still harbor about foreign aggression. More importantly, the deeply humanistic values that underlay his approach transcend religion, theology, customs and rituals. They speak to the glory not so much of God as of the human spirit. This is the essence of what makes Ricci's example one for the ages; an indomitable, tolerant, accepting and accommodating spirit that reached out to the best in people irrespective of race, creed or faith. This is what makes Matteo Ricci's life, with its lasting impact over four centuries, so important and inspiring to humankind.



<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, "Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI on the Occasion of the Fourth Centenary of the Death of Fr. Matteo Ricci," Libreria Editrice Vaticana (6 May 2009) [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/messages/pont-messages/2009/documents/hf\\_ben\\_xvi\\_mes\\_20090506\\_ricci\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/pont-messages/2009/documents/hf_ben_xvi_mes_20090506_ricci_en.html) (accessed 9 August 2010)

<sup>2</sup> Vincent Cronin, The Wise Man from the West: Matteo Ricci and his Mission to China (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1955) p. 3

<sup>3</sup> "Matteo Ricci: Sage of the West," Xinhua News Agency (23 November 2009)

<sup>4</sup> L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, eds., Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1368-1644 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976) p. 1144

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, "Claims and Counter-Claims: The Kangxi Emperor and the Europeans (1661-1722)," The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning (Nettetal: Styler Verlag, 1944) p. 16

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Pierre Charbonnier, Christians in China, AD 600-2000 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007) p. 152

<sup>7</sup> Cronin, p. 22

<sup>8</sup> Charbonnier, p. 143

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Needham, Science and Civilization in China Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954) p. 148

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 173

<sup>11</sup> Rene Fulop-Miller, The Power and Secret of the Jesuits (London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1930) pp. 78-79

<sup>12</sup> John P. Donnelly, Ignatius of Loyola, Founder of the Jesuits (New York: Pearson, 2004) p. 90

<sup>13</sup> Fulop-Miller, pp. 221-222

<sup>14</sup> Yves Camus, SJ, "Matteo Ricci's Legacy: A Loving Patience," Thinking Faith (11 May 2010) p. 2, [http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20100511\\_1.htm](http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20100511_1.htm) (accessed 10 August 2010)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, The Search for Modern China (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990) pp. 3, 7

<sup>17</sup> Immanuel C.Y. Hsu, The Rise of Modern China (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 96

<sup>18</sup> John W. O'Malley, SJ, et al., The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences and the Arts, 1540-1773 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999) p. 117

- <sup>19</sup> Bob Whyte, Unfinished Encounter: China and Christianity (London: Collins, 1988) p. 35
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47
- <sup>23</sup> Camus, p. 2
- <sup>24</sup> Anthony E. Clark, SJ, "Matteo Ricci, SJ: An Apologist for Dialogue," This Rock (November-December 2009) pp. 1-2, <http://www.catholic.com/thisrock/2009/0911fea3.asp> (accessed 9 August 2010)
- <sup>25</sup> Hsu, p. 97
- <sup>26</sup> George H. Dunne, Generation of Giants: The Story of the Jesuits in China in the Last Decades of the Ming Dynasty (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962) p. 44
- <sup>27</sup> Steve Hu, "Newbigin, Syncretism and the Emerging Church," Morehead's Musings (17 April 2008) p. 10, <http://johnwmorehead.blogspot.com/2008/04/steve-hu-newbigin-syncretism-and.html> (accessed 12 August 2010)
- <sup>28</sup> Andrew C. Ross, "Alessandro Valignano: The Jesuits and Culture in the East," in O'Malley et al., pp. 343-345
- <sup>29</sup> Charbonnier, p. 151
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194
- <sup>31</sup> Whyte, p. 61
- <sup>32</sup> Dunne, p. 117
- <sup>33</sup> "Matteo Ricci," Catholic Encyclopedia Vol. 3 (1913) p. 56
- <sup>34</sup> Dunne, p. 119
- <sup>35</sup> Gianni Criveller, "China: Hong Kong: Matteo Ricci maps did not put China at the centre of the world," Spero News (26 January 2010) <http://www.speroforum.com/a/26207/China-Hong-Kong-Matteo-Ricci-maps-did-not-put-China-at-centre-of-the-world> (accessed 9 August, 2010)
- <sup>36</sup> Hsu, pp. 75-76
- <sup>37</sup> Spence, p. 138
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139
- <sup>39</sup> Charbonnier, pp. 154-155
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 161-162
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168
- <sup>43</sup> William T. DeBary, "Reflections on the Chinese Rites Controversy," in O'Malley et al., pp. 301
- <sup>44</sup> John D. Young, Confucianism and Christianity: The First Encounter (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1983) p. 118

- <sup>45</sup> Beverly Foulks, "Duplicitous Thieves: Ouyi Zhixu's Criticism of Jesuit Missionaries in Late Imperial China," in The Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal (Taipei: Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2008) p. 58
- <sup>46</sup> Hsu, p. 101
- <sup>47</sup> Cronin, p. 281
- <sup>48</sup> Young, Confucianism and Christianity, p. 122
- <sup>49</sup> John D. Young, "Chinese Views of the Rites Controversy, 18th-20th Centuries," The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning ed. David E. Mungello (Nettetal: Styler Verlag, 1994) p. 106
- <sup>50</sup> Gianni Criveller, The Parable of Inculturation of the Gospel in China: A Catholic Viewpoint (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003) p. 32
- <sup>51</sup> Arnold Toynbee, The World and the West (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953) p. 65
- <sup>52</sup> David B. Barrett, World Christian Trends, AD 30-AD 2200: Interpreting the Annual Christian Megacensus (California: William Carey Library, 2001) p. 132
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132
- <sup>55</sup> Dunne, pp. 212, 314
- <sup>56</sup> Kenneth Rexroth, "Matteo Ricci's China Journals," The New Republic (21 December 1953)
- <sup>57</sup> Toynbee, p. 64
- <sup>58</sup> Gianni Criveller and Cesar Guilen Nunez, Portrait of a Jesuit: Matteo Ricci (Macau: Matteo Ricci Institute, 2010) p. 38
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39
- <sup>60</sup> Mark O'Neill, "Matteo Ricci," Macau Magazine (October 2010)

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

Benedict XVI, "Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI on the Occasion of the Fourth Centenary of the Death of Fr. Matteo Ricci," Libreria Editrice Vaticana (6 May 2009) [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/messages/pont-messages/2009/documents/hf\\_ben\\_xvi\\_mes\\_20090506\\_ricci\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/pont-messages/2009/documents/hf_ben_xvi_mes_20090506_ricci_en.html) (accessed 9 August 2010)

John Paul II, Pope, "Message on the Fourth Centenary of the Arrival in Beijing of Matteo Ricci," [http://www.schillerinstitute.org/dialogue\\_cultures/pope\\_ricci\\_102401.html](http://www.schillerinstitute.org/dialogue_cultures/pope_ricci_102401.html) (accessed 9 August 2010)

Ricci, Matteo, China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matteo Ricci: 1583-1610 trans. by Louis J. Gallagher, SJ, New York: Random House, 1970

Ricci, Matteo, The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven ed. Edward J. Malatesta, trans. by Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen, Taipei: Ricci Institute, 1985

Trigault, SJ, Nicolas, China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matteo Ricci, 1583-1610 trans. by Louis J. Gallagher, SJ, New York: Random House, 1953

#### Secondary Sources

Barrett, David B., World Christian Trends AD 30-AD 2200: Interpreting the Annual Christian Megacensus California: William Carey Library, 2001

Camus SJ, Yves, "Matteo Ricci's Legacy: A Loving Patience," Thinking Faith, 11 May 2010 [http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20100511\\_1.htm](http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20100511_1.htm) (accessed 10 August 2010)

Catholic Encyclopedia Vol. 3 (1913), s.v. "Matteo Ricci"

Charbonnier, Jean-Pierre, Christians in China, AD 600-2000 Trans. by M.N.L. Couve de Murville, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007

Clark SJ, Anthony E., "Matteo Ricci, SJ: An Apologist for Dialogue," This Rock, November-December 2009, <http://www.catholic.com/thisrock/2009/0911fea3.asp> (accessed 9 August 2010)

Cohen, Paul A., China and Christianity Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963

Criveller, Gianni, The Parable of Inculturation of the Gospel in China: A Catholic Viewpoint Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003

Criveller, Gianni, "Matteo Ricci Maps Did Not Put China at the Centre of the World," Spero News, 26 January 2010, <http://www.speroforum.com/a/26207/China-Hong-Kong-Matteo-Ricci-maps-did-not-put-China-at-the-centre-of-the-world> (accessed 9 August 2010)

Criveller, Gianni, and Cesar Guilen Nunez, Portrait of a Jesuit: Matteo Ricci Macau: Matteo Ricci Institute, 2010

Cronin, Vincent, The Wise Man From the West: Matteo Ricci and His Mission to China New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1955

Donnelly, John P., Ignatius of Loyola, Founder of the Jesuits New York: Pearson, 2004

Dunne, George H., Generation of Giants: The Story of the Jesuits in China in the Last Decades of the Ming Dynasty Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962

Foulks, Beverly, "Duplicitous Thieves: Ouyi Zhixu's Criticism of Jesuit Missionaries in Late Imperial China," The Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal Taipei: Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2008

Fulop-Miller, Rene, The Power and Secret of the Jesuits London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1930

Gernet, Jacques, China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures Trans. by Janet Lloyd, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985

Goodrich, L. Carrington, and Chaoying Fang, Eds., Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1368-1644 New York: Columbia University Press, 1976

Harris, SJ, George, "The Mission of Matteo Ricci, SJ: A Case Study of an Effort at Guided Cultural Change in the Sixteenth Century," Monumenta Serica 25 1968

Hsu, Immanuel C.Y., The Rise of Modern China New York: Oxford University Press, 2000

Hu, Steve, "Newbigin, Syncretism and the Emerging Church," Morehead's Musings 17 April 2008, <http://johnwmorehead.blogspot.com/2008/04/steve-hu-newbigin-syncretism-and.html> (accessed 12 August 2010)

McBrien, Richard P., "Matteo Ricci After 400 Years" National Catholic Reporter 1 June 2010, <http://www.ncronline.org/essays-theology/matteo-ricci-after-400-years> (accessed 10 August 2010)

Mungello, David E., Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989

Mungello, David E., Ed., The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning Nettetal: Styler Verlag, 1994

Mungello, David E., The Great Encounter of China and the West, 1500-1800 Lanham, Maryland: Rowan & Littlefield, 2009

Needham, Joseph, Science and Civilization in China Vols. 1 and 3, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954, 1959

O'Connell, Marvin R., The Counter Reformation, 1559-1610 New York: Harper & Row, 1974

O'Neill, Mark, "Matteo Ricci," Macau Magazine October 2010

Rexroth, Kenneth, "Matteo Ricci's China Journals," The New Republic 21 December 1953

Ross, Andrew C., A Vision Betrayed: The Jesuits in Japan and China, 1542-1742 Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994

Ross, Andrew C., "Alessandro Valignano: The Jesuits and Culture in the East," The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences and the Arts, 1540-1773 Eds. John W. O'Malley, SJ et al., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999

Spence, Jonathan D., The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci New York: Penguin, 1984

Spence, Jonathan D., The Search for Modern China New York: W.W. Norton, 1990

Spence, Jonathan D., "Claims and Counter-Claims: The Kangxi Emperor and the Europeans (1661-1722)," The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning Ed. David E. Mungello, Nettetal: Styler Verlag, 1994

Standaert, Nicolas, "Jesuit Corporate Culture as Shaped by the Chinese," The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences, and The Arts, 1540-1773 Ed. John W. O'Malley et al., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999

Standaert, Nicolas, "Christianity in the Late Ming and Early Qing as a Case of Cultural Transmission," China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future Ed. Stephen Uhalley and Xiaoxin Wu, Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2001

Toynbee, Arnold, The World and the West New York: Oxford University Press, 1953

Whyte, Bob, Unfinished Encounter: China and Christianity London: Collins, 1988

Young, John D., East-West Synthesis: Matteo Ricci and Confucianism Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 1980

Young, John D., Confucianism and Christianity: The First Encounter Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1983

Zurcher, Erik, "Jesuit Accommodation and the Chinese Cultural Imperative," The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning Ed. David E. Mungello, Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1994

Paul Johnson

Pages 47–48 of “A Relativistic World” in

*Modern Times, The World from the Twenties to the Eighties*

New York: Harper & Row Colophon edition, 1985

The disturbances in Europe and the world which followed the seismic shock of the Great War and its unsatisfactory peace were, in one sense, only to be expected. The old order had gone. Plainly it could not be fully restored, perhaps not restored at all. A new order would eventually take its place. But would this be an ‘order’ in the sense the pre-1914 world had understood the term? There were, as we have seen, disquieting currents of thought which suggested the image of a world adrift, having left its moorings in traditional law and morality. There was too a new hesitancy on the part of established and legitimate authority to get the global vessel back under control by the accustomed means, or any means. It constituted an invitation, unwilling and unissued but nonetheless implicit, to others to take over. Of the great trio of German imaginative scholars who offered explanations of human behavior in the nineteenth century, and whose corpus of thought the post-1918 world inherited, only two have so far been mentioned. Marx described a world in which the central dynamic was economic interest. To Freud, the principal thrust was sexual. Both assumed that religion, the old impulse which moved men and masses, was a fantasy and always had been. Friedrich Nietzsche, the third of the trio, was also an atheist. But he saw God not as an invention but as a casualty, and his demise as in some important sense an historical event, which would have dramatic consequences. He wrote in 1886: ‘The greatest event of recent times—that “God is Dead,” that the belief in the Christian God is no longer tenable—is beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe.’ Among the advanced races, the decline and ultimately the collapse of the religious impulse would leave a huge vacuum. The history of modern times is in great part the history of how that vacuum had been filled. Nietzsche rightly perceived that the most likely candidate would be what he called the ‘Will to Power,’ which offered a far more comprehensive and in the end more plausible explanation of human behaviour than either Marx or Freud. In place of religious belief, there would be secular ideology. Those who had once filled the ranks of the totalitarian clergy would become totalitarian politicians. And, above all, the Will to Power would produce a new kind of messiah, uninhibited by any religious sanctions whatever, and with an unappeasable appetite for controlling mankind. The end of the old order, with an unguided world adrift in a relativistic universe, was a summons to such gangster–statesmen to emerge. They were not slow to make their appearance.