
THE VENERABLE MATTEO RICCI

可敬的利玛窦神父

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ABSTRACT

On December 17, 2022, the day of his 86th birthday, Pope Francis signed the decree recognizing the heroic virtues of Ricci, making him Venerable. This gives me the occasion for sharing some insights I have gathered from his life. When I joined the Jesuits in France some thirty years ago, I was quite unfamiliar with the story of Matteo Ricci. Now, having lived in China for some twenty years, Ricci has become a real inspiration for me, as he is for many people here, four centuries after his death. I have come to appreciate how important Matteo Ricci still is for many Chinese people, far beyond the small Catholic community in China. Ricci represents a wonderfully positive encounter between China and the West, long before the traumatic experiences of colonisation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries sullied the relationship. In presenting his life and work, I hope to explain how Ricci found the presence of God, the Chinese Christ, in the people of China.

Early Years

Matteo Ricci was born in 1552 in the small city of Macerata in Central Italy, not far from the Adriatic Sea. At that time, the Jesuits had only recently come into being, in 1540, and Ricci attended one of their earliest colleges, where he studied humanities. His father, an herbal pharmacist and member of the city council, hoping that Matteo would assume an important role in the life of the city, sent him to La Sapienza University in Rome to study Law.

Matteo had other ideas, however, and against his father's will he joined the Jesuits in 1571. After his novitiate, he received a broad training at the Jesuits' Roman College, which included philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy. His request to be sent to the missions was granted, and he departed for the Far East from Lisbon in 1578. After spending some years in India, where he completed his theological studies and carried out some pastoral work, he arrived Macau, a Portuguese trading post, in 1582.

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Learning to Respect the Culture

Some westerners at that time, on coming to East Asia, dreamt about a military invasion on the model of the *conquista* in South America or in the Philippines, but most people realised that this model would not work in Japan or China. For their part, the Jesuits had learned their own lessons from the experience of St Francis Xavier and the companions who had accompanied him in Japan some decades earlier. They had arrived in 1549 and were successful in converting local feudal lords, quickly bringing about mass conversions. But Christianity was not well integrated into the fabric of Japanese society and had only shallow roots from which to grow.

Alessandro Valignano, the official Jesuit Visitor for all East Asia, realised that above all Christianity needed to be rooted in Asian culture if it was to flourish. Instead of missionaries proclaiming the gospel through local catechists, as had been the practice elsewhere, Valignano believed that Christianity needed first to be immersed within the local culture; it was on this rock, he believed, that evangelisation could be built. Thus, he organised a serious training program in philosophy and theology for young Japanese Jesuits that was adapted to their culture.

Valignano also wished to promote the project of St Francis Xavier who, in 1552, had died on Sancian Island off the coast of China, attempting to reach the Chinese mainland. For this purpose, he instructed Ricci, and another recently arrived Jesuit, Michele Ruggieri, to learn the Chinese language thoroughly. This may appear today as an obvious requirement, but back then many missionaries considered learning the language a waste of time and were satisfied with very basic language skills in announcing the gospel.

Putting down Deep Roots

Ruggieri accompanied the Portuguese merchants on their short business trips from Macau to Canton, but he was expected to return immediately with them, since foreigners were not allowed to settle in China. Despite that ban, however, the inspector general of the provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi made an exception: he allowed the Jesuits to take up residence in the city of Zhaoqing to practice their religious life, which he considered to be a variant of Buddhism. The exotic gifts the Jesuits brought with them from the west – such as clocks and musical instruments – played an important role in this development, as did their friendship with the Prefect of Zhaoqing. His permission signified a major breakthrough.

For any westerner, learning Chinese is a school of humility and patience. When Ruggieri and Ricci started to learn the language, they could not rely on any manual or textbook, for there was none, so one of the first things they did was to write a dictionary for themselves. Furthermore, they quickly realised that it was not enough to learn the language as commonly spoken. To communicate effectively with the literati – the educated classes – they needed to reach a level of excellence in the language, because the future development of Christianity in China depended on the goodwill and official authorisation of this powerful group. Ruggieri and Ricci had to leave aside any dream they may have had of quick evangelisation. They would not be building churches with hundreds of worshippers in attendance.

Instead, they spent their time reading the Chinese classics and attempting to understand Confucian learning, especially the *Four Books* which were central to Chinese culture and which they started to translate into Latin. In the process,

they discovered that the ancient Chinese texts already contained the concept of divinity; more controversially, they also came to believe that the notion of God was properly expressed in Chinese as *Shangdi*, or the Lord-on-High.

A Controversial Issue

Valignano instructed Ricci to write a catechism that would incorporate passages of the Chinese classics, and this he undertook with enthusiasm. It took a lot of time and a lot of hard work. After ten years of study of the Chinese classics and dialogue with Confucian literati, whose help he used, Ricci published in 1603 *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, in which he proclaims that the Christian God, the Lord of Heaven (*Tianzhu*), is the same as the *Shangdi* of the ancient Chinese texts.

This was a controversial issue. Ricci understood that linguistic and cultural mediations were necessary to talk about the Christian faith in a way the Chinese people could appreciate, and he accepted the risk of translating the concept of God into a different language and culture. Others, more cautious, rejected the risk altogether and insisted on using the Latin word, *Deus*, which they transliterated into Chinese as *Dou-si*. Ricci's acceptance of *Shangdi* was based on his close study of Chinese texts and his consequent understanding of them. It was not a resigned concession to the local culture. Nor was it a strategy for manipulating the Chinese language from within, twisting the original meaning into something completely different and colonising China, not through military weapons, but through ideological tools.

In fact, many people who analyse the interaction of Ricci with Chinese scholars are too rigid in their interpretation of that encounter, failing to consider the fact that both Ricci and the Chinese scholars were transformed through the dialogue. In this process, Ricci encountered the Chinese Christ, an experience by which he was himself altered and shaped by the Other. This was a truly Christian experience, which led Ricci to renounce, like Christ, the illusion of egotism and self-power, opening his life, through the mediation of the others, to the presence of the Father in the Chinese culture.

Busy Years in Beijing

Through his writings, we can appreciate how open Ricci was to learning from this new culture and sharing it with others. In his memoirs, written at the end of his life, Ricci retraced his long and adventurous journey from South China up to Beijing, sharing all that he learnt about this new culture on the way. He expresses his amazement at the sophistication of its administration, for instance. He praises the civil examination system which allocates public functions in a fair way, while Europe was still using the hereditary system, or resorting to the purchase of public offices. He wonders at the social order he found in China at a time when Europe was being torn apart by wars. Ricci, as we can see, had largely left aside a Eurocentric vision of the world, and had enriched himself with all his discoveries.

In the spring of 1600, Ricci, carrying some gifts for the emperor, journeyed northwards from Nanjing. The journey was not without incident and perils. He was held in jail in Tianjin for five months until, when the emperor heard that a foreigner had some gifts for him, he was finally

allowed to proceed to Beijing. On 25 January 1601, Ricci presented his gifts, together with a written tribute, before the empty imperial throne. The emperor and the women of the palace were quite excited by those gifts, especially the two clocks whose hourly chimes intrigued them very much. Since the clocks contained complicated mechanisms, Ricci was allowed to prolong his stay to keep the clocks in good working order.

In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI wrote of Ricci, “What made his apostolate original, and we could say prophetic, was the profound sympathy he nourished for the Chinese, for their cultures and religious traditions. Even today, his example remains as a model of a fruitful encounter between European and Chinese civilizations.” ... This is probably one of the deepest insights Ricci has to teach us: if God created the wonderful culture and traditions of China, then the Chinese cannot but have something to say about God himself.

Ricci also carried with him a wealth of scientific knowledge which the Chinese greatly appreciated. In many ways, the science he brought was more advanced than Chinese scientific studies, but Ricci never used his knowledge in an arrogant way to show his superiority, nor did he withhold information to appear better than the Chinese. On the contrary, he freely communicated his knowledge to the many Chinese who came to

him. For example, he spent a few years teaching geometry to one of these students, Xu Guangqi, after which they produced together a translation of the *Elements* of Euclid.

While in Beijing, Ricci found himself particularly busy every third year, receiving in his residence hundreds of scholars who were arriving to take part in the national examination. They asked him questions about his map of the world, about how to compute the timings of eclipses of the sun or moon, and occasionally about theological issues. Ricci mentions in his letters that he often had no time for lunch and was forced to fast on these occasions, but he never tired of giving explanations to those who joined in their conversations.

Ricci was fully aware that it would take much time for Christianity to become accustomed to China, and for China to become accustomed to Christianity. He was also careful not to shock the literati by discussing with them the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection. Some other missionaries would criticise him for that, but Ricci was prepared to wait until they were ready to hear the message. For those who were ready, he would talk freely about those mysteries, and he would give them some catechetical texts which he had prepared for this purpose. Ricci's patient method of evangelisation reflects his respect for the Incarnation at work in the culture.

China's Impact on Ricci

Ricci had to reshape his identity as a Westerner, as a Jesuit missionary and as a priest. He had been sent by the Jesuit order for the mission in China, and he kept in regular communication with Valignano and the Superior General in Rome. From them he received

instructions, guidelines, and encouragements, as well as the practical support of new Jesuits, with finance and books. Ricci also wrote letters to his family members, teachers, fellow Jesuits, and friends in Europe. Communication was slow and unreliable at that time, of course: a letter would usually take two years to arrive at its destination, and many were lost on the way. Only fifty-four letters of Ricci have survived.

Ricci lived in isolation, some 2,000 km away from Macau and often under the suspicion of being a foreign spy. He quickly understood that he needed the support of Chinese friends, and he developed a network of relationships that would protect him from being misunderstood or abused by some who were only interested in taking advantage of his expertise. It is quite significant that the first book Ricci wrote in China is his *Treatise on Friendship*, which earned him a lot of moral credit.

Another metamorphosis concerned his religious identity. When Ruggieri and Ricci arrived in China, they naturally decided to adopt a clear religious identity. They wore the Buddhist garb, shaved their heads, and lived next to Buddhist temples. They shared with Buddhist monks many similarities, like the celibate life, community living, religious rituals, and the reading of scriptures. By adopting the social trappings of Buddhism, the Jesuits made it clear from the start that they had come to China not for business or other secular aims, but for religious reasons.

Nevertheless, their adoption of a pseudo-Buddhist identity created a lot of confusion, because Ruggieri and Ricci explicitly rejected core tenets of Buddhism, such as belief in reincarnation. Eventually, Ricci repudiated any association with Buddhism altogether. Indeed,

from today's perspective, we can see that Ricci had a poor understanding of Buddhism. He inherited from his confrères in Japan their biased judgment about Buddhism as being either idolatrous or atheist. Having rejected any association with Buddhism, and probably following his Confucian interlocutors, Ricci developed a very harsh attitude towards Buddhist monks, as well as Taoist priests.

In 1595, Ricci left the Guangdong province, where he had spent twelve years, and he moved to the Jiangxi province. Along the way, he changed his social identity, dropping the Buddhist garb completely, and wearing instead the silk garb of the Confucian literati with its four-cornered hat. It was at this time that he grew the long beard that we know from his portrait. This bold decision, which was approved by Valignano, meant that Ricci entered further into a Confucian way of life, in which the delimitation between the secular and the sacred operate very differently than in the West. This meant that the sacred could be found in the secular, within the interplay of personal relationships regulated by the Confucian rituals.

It was in this context that Ricci came to understand the meaning of the rituals to the ancestors that were frequently practised among the Chinese. In front of the tablets of their parents and ancestors, the Chinese were not worshipping idols with supernatural powers, he believed, but they were expressing their connectedness with those who had transmitted life, culture, and moral principles to them. Later, after Ricci's death, this issue – known as the Chinese Rites Controversy – would become the focus of yet another controversy, as we shall see.

Despite the obvious limitations of the theology of his time, Ricci was able to engage in a fruitful experience, in which he encountered the Chinese Christ through his Chinese friends, through the teaching of Confucius, and through the moral and cultural ideals of China. Ricci was not only a great scholar of China and its language; he had a deep empathy for the people and for their culture, allowing them to effect in him a self-transformation. By discovering the Chinese Christ, Ricci enriched his own experience of Christ and was able to communicate it to others.

On one occasion, Ricci wrote that his was not yet a time for reaping in China, nor even for sowing, but rather a time for clearing the woods. On another occasion, he wrote that the success of the Jesuits' apostolate should not be judged by counting the number of Christians only, but by the strength of the foundation they were establishing for a very big enterprise.

Appreciation for Ricci Today

After his death in 1610, Ricci's vision and practices were criticised and re-evaluated on many occasions. This was especially true during the Chinese Rites Controversy, when some missionaries in China were loud in opposition to Ricci's understanding of these practices. The controversy continued for many decades, and finally, in 1704, the Pope condemned as superstitious the rituals offered to Confucius and the ancestors. These rituals, which were prescribed as normative for Chinese society, were now forbidden to Chinese Catholics. This provoked a reaction from the Chinese emperors, who ordered a stricter control over the Catholic Church, leading eventually its proscription. Many Chinese Catholics remained faithful, however, and practised their faith in a discreet way.

It was not until 1939 that the Chinese Rites were once again allowed to Catholics, by Pope Pius XII. Later, the Second Vatican Council returned to the underlying issue, when it stressed the importance of culture in evangelization. From then on Ricci began to be seen as a model of what we know today as “inculturation”. Twenty years after the Council, the cause for Ricci’s beatification was started in 1984, in the diocese of Macerata, and in 2013 it was transmitted to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, where it is still in process.

In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI wrote of Ricci, “What made his apostolate original, and we could say prophetic, was the profound sympathy he nourished for the Chinese, for their cultures and religious traditions. Even today, his example remains as a model of a fruitful encounter between European and Chinese civilizations.” In 2016, Pope Francis echoed his predecessor’s sentiments when he explained how he drew inspiration from Ricci, who showed the Church that “it is necessary to enter into dialogue with China”, because of its wealth of wisdom and history, as “a land blessed with many things”. This is probably one of the deepest insights Ricci has to teach us: if God created the wonderful culture and traditions of China, then the Chinese cannot but have something to say about God himself. Let us pray that through intercession of Ricci we may discover better the presence of the living Christ in China and in the world.



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REFERENCES 参考资料

- For a longer biography in French language from the author, see *Matteo Ricci, À la découverte du Christ chinois*, Collection Sur la route des saints, Bruxelles : Fidélité – Éditions jésuites, 2022.