

Matteo ricci

Religion



The year 1982 was a ‘Ricci-year’: scholarly meetings in different places around the world, from Chicago (US), over Macerata (Italy) to Taipei (Taiwan), commemorated Matteo Ricci’s entry in China. It was exactly four hundred years since his arrival in the Portuguese settlement of Macao in 1582 and his entry into the mainland one year later. In 2001, there were new celebrations of Ricci, in Hong Kong and in Beijing, commemorating his definitive settling in Beijing in 1601. The year 2010 is again a ‘Ricci-year’, this time commemorating his death in Beijing in 1610.

Is there anything new to be said about Matteo Ricci after this time-lapse of twenty-seven years, which corresponds to the period of Ricci’s own ascent to and settling in Beijing? Well, his writings have become more accessible to the academic and wider community: for instance, in Chinese there are now readily available editions of his Chinese writings and several translations of his *Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesu e Christianita nella Cina* (‘About the Christian expedition to China undertaken by the Society of Jesus’) – a strong contrast to the prudent two-page article in *Renmin huabao* (‘China Pictorial’) of July 1982.

But publications not only flourished in Chinese. The Ruggieri-Ricci manuscript of the Portuguese-Chinese dictionary was published for the first time; Ricci’s letters and the Italian version of *Della entrata* were reprinted (2000-2001)[1]; others works have been translated: the catechism *Tianzhu shiyi* (‘The True Meaning of God’) into English, Japanese, Korean and Italian; the treatise on friendship *Jiaoyoulun* into Italian, German, and French; the treatise on mnemotechnics (the art of memory), *Xiguo jifa* into German.

There were numerous secondary sources: at least 200 articles, many of them in Chinese, illuminate various aspects of his life and works. The most well-known work is possibly Jonathan Spence's *Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (1984), also translated into Chinese (two translations), French, Spanish and Dutch. [2] All this is very impressive and underscores the fact that Ricci remains an attractive figure both on the academic and the more popular level.

Yet a close look at these writings reveals in particular the excellence of research accomplished earlier: the quality of Pasquale d'Elia's annotated edition of the primary sources (*Fonti Ricciane*, 3 vols. , 1942-1949)[3] and the analysis of the method of evangelisation by d'Elia's student Johannes Bettray (*Die Akkommodationsmethode des P. Matteo Ricci S. I. in China*, 1955)[4] is rarely matched today. Since these writings are in Italian and German respectively, they have unfortunately often been neglected.

Compared to these writings, recent publications rarely bring to light new elements about Ricci himself, they rather nuance Ricci's ' success story' by putting his accomplishments and writings in a broader context. For instance, it appears that Ricci was less accommodative than often assumed,[5] and that fellow Jesuits such as Niccolo Longobardo (1565-1655) had a better knowledge of the Chinese Classics and the Neo-Confucian commentaries than Ricci himself. How then to tell Ricci's story in the year 2010?

One major development in recent years is the historiography of the contacts between cultures, with a primary question of the perspective from which one needs to look at the missionary: from his own perspective or from the perspective of the receiving culture? Taking benefit from these

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developments, this article will reread Ricci's story and ask how Ricci was shaped by the other, especially by the Chinese. [6] Four characteristics of Jesuit missionary strategy in China As a starting point one can make a first – rather traditional – reading of Ricci's life by focusing on the missionary himself.

The ' Jesuit missionary strategy' in China was conceived by Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606), who was the former novice master of Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and who was Jesuit visitor for East Asia during the period 1574-1606. His strategy was creatively put into practice by Matteo Ricci. Later generations, well into the eighteenth century, associated this strategy with Ricci and called it the ' Ricci-method'. It can be described by four major characteristics[7]: 1. A policy of accommodation or adaptation to Chinese culture. 8] Valignano, who had been disappointed by the limited degree of the Jesuits' adaptation to Japanese culture, insisted in the first place on knowledge of the Chinese language. Therefore he called a few Jesuits to Macao in 1579 ordering them to focus their attention entirely on the study of language (fellow Jesuits criticised them for spending all their time studying Chinese). Two years later Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607) entered China through the south, and Matteo Ricci followed one year later. Probably inspired by the Japanese situation, they dressed like Buddhist monks. In 1595, after nearly fifteen ears of experience, they changed this policy and adapted themselves to the life-style and etiquette of the Confucian elite of literati and officials. Ricci was responsible for this change. This new policy remained unchanged throughout the whole seventeenth century and for most Jesuit missionaries Matteo Ricci became the reference point with regard

to the accommodation policy. 2. Propagation and evangelisation 'from the top down'. Jesuits addressed themselves to the literate elite. The underlying idea was that if this elite, preferably the Emperor and his court, were converted, the whole country would be won for Christianity.

The elite consisted mainly of literati, who had spent many years of their life preparing for the examinations they needed to pass to become officials. For these examinations they had to learn the Confucian classics and the commentaries. After having passed the Metropolitan examinations, which took place in Beijing every three years and at which about three hundred candidates were selected, they entered the official bureaucracy and received appointments as district magistrates or positions in the ministries.

As in modern diplomatic service, the offices usually changed every three years. In order to enter into contact with this elite, Ricci studied the Confucian classics and, with his remarkable gift of memory, became a welcome guest at the philosophical discussion groups that were organised by this elite. 3. Indirect propagation of the faith by using European science and technology in order to attract the attention of the educated Chinese and convince them of the high level of European civilisation.

Ricci offered a European clock to the Emperor, he introduced paintings which impressed the Chinese with their use of perspective, translated mathematical writings of Euclid with the commentaries of the famous Jesuit mathematician Christophorus Clavius (1538-1612), and printed an enormous global map which integrated the results of the latest world explorations. By these activities Ricci established friendly relationships which sometimes resulted in the conversion of members of the elite: Xu Guangqi (1562-1633;

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baptised as Paul in 1603) and Li Zhizao (1565-1630; baptised as Leo in 1610) are the most famous of Ricci's time. . Openness to and tolerance of Chinese values. In China, Matteo Ricci encountered a society with high moral values, for which he expressed his admiration. Educated in the best Jesuit humanistic tradition, he favourably compared Confucius (552-479 BC) with ' an other Seneca' and the Confucians with ' a sect of Epicurians, not in name, but in their laws and opinions'. [9] Ricci was of the opinion that the excellent ethical and social doctrine of Confucianism should be complemented with the metaphysical ideas of Christianity.

However, he rejected Buddhism, Taoism, and Neo-Confucianism, which in his eyes was corrupted by Buddhism. Ricci pleaded for a return to original Confucianism, which he considered to be a philosophy based on natural law. In his opinion it contained the idea of God. Finally, he adopted a tolerant attitude towards certain Confucian rites, such as the ancestral worship and the veneration of Confucius, which soon were labelled ' civil rites'.
Methodological questions There are several reasons why these four characteristics can rightly be identified as typical for Ricci and his fellow-Jesuits in a broader sense.

First of all, one can easily find a justification for them in the Jesuit official documents of Ignatian inspiration, especially the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises, which often insist on accommodation. Secondly, one can contrast these policies with those adopted by the contemporary Franciscans and Dominicans. These orders appeared less accommodative, less elite-oriented, less involved with sciences, and, lastly, less tolerant towards local ritual traditions.

Finally, in publications about Jesuits in China in modern times, both by Jesuits and non-Jesuits, these elements are in one way or another presented as ‘ typically Ricci’ or as ‘ typically Jesuit’. There are also several reasons why these characteristics of strategy can be questioned. First, it can be questioned whether it is a ‘ Jesuit’ strategy. Here, the comparison with the mission in Japan is quite determining. The first thirty years of Jesuit mission in Japan show quite a different picture, since before Valignano's arrival the accommodation policy was very restricted.

Thus the actual strategy was determined to a large extent by the inspiration of an individual such as Valignano rather than by a common ‘ Jesuit’ formation or training. A second problem with ‘ strategy’ is that it seems to refer to a pre-set and well-thought policy that was consistently executed over time. Yet, some scholars have convincingly argued that Ricci himself ‘ had not formed a precise opinion on the problem of evangelisation in China and that his judgment concerning the means and methods to adopt in order to convert the Chinese varied in the course of the years he spent on this task. [10] Thus the systematic labelling of any action as issuing from a ‘ Ricci-method’ is probably an overestimation. Thus, while these four characteristics of the Jesuit strategy in China are certainly not invalid, they possibly present only one side of the story. The major methodological objection that can be raised is that an identity is not only formed through the isolated effort of the Self, but is shaped through constant interaction with the Other. This is true for individuals, but also for groups.

Therefore, what we call the Jesuit missionary strategy in China is not only the result of a conscious and well-defined policy conceived by Valignano and the

proactive and creative elaboration of it by missionaries like Matteo Ricci. To a large extent, it is also the result of their reaction to what China was and who the Chinese were. In other words, their identity was shaped by the Chinese Other as well. If Ricci became who he became, it was also because the Other encouraged him actively or passively to become like that.

Thus the story should not only be told from the perspective of the missionary (Ricci), but also from the perspective of the receiving community (the Chinese). I will therefore review the four different characteristics and try to demonstrate how the Chinese ‘Other’ helped shape the Jesuit mission. I will bring into the picture the results of recent research on Christianity in late Ming China. These results have often been obtained by focusing on the point of view of the Chinese, ‘the Other’, and by taking the Chinese texts as primary source for research. Shaped by the Other 1.

Accommodation to Chinese culture. The most obvious example of the interference of the Other in the field of accommodation is the change from a policy of adaptation to Buddhism to a policy of adaptation to Confucianism (and subsequently the rejection of Buddhism). The Other was already present in the original decision to adopt the Buddhist dress, since it was the Governor of Guangdong who either insisted that this was the way the missionaries should dress, or who approved the proposal of Michele Ruggieri to do so. [11] The accommodation to the Buddhist life-style was not without advantages.

It enabled the Jesuits to make contact with the majority of the Chinese population more easily and allowed them to focus conversation directly on religious matters. But there were also disadvantages. From a Confucian

perspective, Buddhism and Christianity shared many religious elements and were very similar to each other. Both can be classified as an institutional religion with a system of theology, rituals and organisation of its own, independent of so-called secular institutions. Confucianism, on the other hand, resembles a diffused religion.

Its theology, rituals, and organisation were intrinsically tied up with the concepts and structures of secular institutions and the secular social order.

[12] Moreover, Christianity shared elements with Buddhism such as belief in afterlife, the idea of heaven and hell, the practice of celibacy, etc. which were very un-Confucian. From Ricci's *Della entrata* and later apologetic works one can observe that precisely this similarity to the Other (the Buddhists) forced the Jesuits to dissociate themselves from the Other and emphasise their differences.

The first (unconscious) reason for this change was that within the Chinese religious context there was too much competition between Buddhism and Christianity. Jesuits were in fact subjected to the phenomenon of 'inflated difference': i. e. the phenomenon in which a minority group, pressed to consolidate its own identity, is prone to dis-identify with others and to play up otherwise negligible differences between those inside and those outside its boundaries. [13] The only way to dissociate themselves from the Buddhist monks (who were considered to be very low on the social ladder) was to turn to Confucianism.

In fact, it was the Other represented by Confucian literati such as Qu Taisu (Qu Rukui) (b. 1549) who encouraged Ricci to institute this change. [14] Here a second important element in which the Other determines the Self needs to

be mentioned. It was labelled ‘cultural imperative’ by Erik Zürcher, and belongs to the deep structure in Chinese religious life in late imperial China.

[15] No marginal religion penetrating from the outside could expect to take root in China (at least at a high social level) unless it conformed to a pattern that in late imperial times was more clearly defined than ever.

Confucianism represented what is zheng (‘orthodox’) in a religious, ritual, social and political sense. In order not to be branded as xie (‘heterodox’) and be treated as a subversive sect, a marginal religion had to prove that it was on the side of zheng. The authority of Confucianism, and its sheer mass and attractive power, were such that any religious system from outside was caught in its field, and was bound to gravitate towards that centre. These two elements, inflated difference and cultural imperative, show the heavy influence of the Other in Ricci's strategy of accommodation.

The Chinese made Ricci adapt to the particular Chinese situation. One may also point out that the refinement and sophistication of the Other imposed some limits on the accommodation by the Jesuits. It is indeed remarkable that the Jesuits apparently were not able to accommodate themselves to certain aspects of Chinese culture because they were too difficult to master or were too different from the European background. Here one touches on aspects of Jesuit corporate culture in Europe and many parts of the world that were not put into practice in China.

The clearest example is that of schools and education. Despite their hope to replace the subject-matter of the Chinese exams by Aristotelian philosophy, the Jesuits were never able to influence the well-established Chinese education system. There were also aspects that did not belong to their

corporate culture, but that were also too sophisticated to learn or to adopt. In the field of arts, one usually cites the successful adaptation of Jesuit painters like Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), but there is hardly any adoption of, or interest in, Chinese calligraphy.

Yet, every member of the educated Chinese elite spent long hours when they were young learning calligraphy, and quite a few continued to practise it every day of their lives. Although the Jesuits' effort was directed at this elite, in their copious writings there is hardly any indication that the Jesuits appreciated the aesthetic dimension of calligraphy and the pivotal role that it played in Chinese culture. [16] In the field of Chinese customs, Ricci and his fellow-Jesuits found it impossible to let their finger nails grow very long, as was the custom among the Chinese literati. [17] These are negative examples of influence that clearly show how Chinese culture imposed limits on accommodation. 2. The propagation 'from the top' is a second field in which the role of the Other can be amply shown. First it should be pointed out that the motive of Ricci's 'ascent to Beijing'[18] was not necessarily the conversion of the Emperor. The initial objective of Ricci, as expressed in his *Della entrata*, was not to reach Beijing, but just to have a residence on the mainland.

It was because of the many difficulties Jesuits encountered in obtaining permission to enter China and in establishing a permanent residence there that they gradually made a plan to go to Beijing in order to obtain the support of the 'King of China'. [19] In this move to Beijing they largely depended on the elite. [20] There certainly were proactive or planned decisions by Ricci and his companions: they preferred the centre to the

periphery and they chose to live in a city rather than in the countryside. ‘Centre’ meant the administrative centre, the place with a higher concentration of magistrates and literati.

Thus they preferred Zhaoqing to Canton, because the Governor was residing in Zhaoqing, and Canton was only second choice. [21] The choice of the city was quite obviously connected with the choice of the centre. But these proactive or planned decisions by Ricci should be supplemented by two reactive or guided decisions, which were as important if not more important: many movements were arranged through personal relationships (*guanxi*) and a number of residences were established because the Jesuits were expelled from or not allowed to live in certain places.

In both of these decisions the Other played a key role. The concept of *guanxi* or relationships is central to any understanding of Chinese social structures. It denotes an essential part of network-building within Chinese social life. The many difficulties encountered by Ricci and his companions in trying to establish a residence in various cities are often attributed to the fact that they were foreigners. While this is certainly true, the Jesuits also lacked the necessary *guanxi* to secure the social resources needed for their goals.

They lacked common attributes: they could not refer to a common kinship, locality, religion or examination experience. Chinese society very quickly made the Jesuits aware of the importance of this network building and the originality of Ricci is to have understood it. It took the Jesuits a long time, but after more than ten years they succeeded in acquiring some ‘attributes’. The two most important were their behaving like Chinese literati, and

subsequently, the establishment of a network based on common Christian rituals.

The role of the Other mediated by guanxi became very important in the move from the south to the north of the country and the establishment of new mission posts, and the Jesuits' decisions were taken in response to the initiative or circumstances of these guanxi. The case of Michele Ruggieri travelling to Shaoxing (Zhejiang) is a fine example of this reactive or guided decision-making. [22] He was not travelling to Shaoxing because of a planned decision on his part, but rather because he had a guanxi who happened to be travelling to Shaoxing and who wanted to take Ruggieri with him.

Another pattern was closely linked to this one. Chinese converts would settle in a new place (or return to their place of origin), expand the network of believers, and then invite a missionary. This pattern became more common as the community of believers increased and came to include some converts of higher social standing (especially after 1600). Here some structures of Chinese administrative life played an important role. Like other literati, Christian literati changed offices regularly (in principle every three years), or returned to their native towns. Their moves determined those of the missionaries.

Another way of establishing a community in a given city was also a reaction to decisions made by others: Jesuits decided to settle in one place because they were not allowed to settle in the place of their original choice. In some cases this was even linked to direct expulsion. 3. The use of science in the service of the propagation of faith too was largely determined by the Other,

as can be shown in the writings of the Jesuits and their converts. The first presentation of European science was made in the form of curiosities like a clock and prisms, with the result that at the beginning Jesuits were considered as alchemists.

The first writings of the Jesuits, however, (i. e. what they wrote with only limited influence of the Other), were not scientific but entirely religious and catechetical in nature. It was due to the quest of Chinese scholars, who could not believe that educated scholars could come from far away, that Ricci engaged himself in composing a Chinese version of the world map he had in his room, in order to show where he came from. [23] A further step was the translation of works on mathematics and astronomy. Many scholars have pointed out that this translation took place in the particular context of Late Ming learning.

If Chinese scholars were interested in the science brought by the Jesuits, it was because prior to their arrival Chinese literati had developed an interest in practical learning. The search for 'solid learning' or 'concrete studies' (shixue) was a reaction against some intuitionist movements originating from the Wang Yangming school in the late sixteenth century. According to Wang Yangming (1472-1528), the principles for moral action were to be found entirely within the mind-and-heart (xin) and not outside.

In the early seventeenth century, the influential intellectual and political movement of the Donglin thinkers re-established the importance of 'things in the world'. Officials and scholars searched for concrete ways to save the country from decay. [24] It is this preceding quest that led to the unique interaction between the Chinese literati and the Jesuits. The Jesuits

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themselves were initially not much interested in translating mathematical works, but in response to the insistence of converts such as Xu Guangqi they again and again undertook this kind of time-consuming and long-lasting activity.

Later, this insistence by the Chinese (converts) on practical learning was one of the reasons that prevented Jesuits from engaging in projects such as translating the Bible. Early missionaries such as Ricci had no particular advanced training in sciences (even if they were versed in them) and were not sent to spread scientific knowledge. Only later missionaries with a specific scientific training were sent to respond to the quest of the Other and to guarantee the protection of the Church by the Chinese Court.

The acceptance of Western sciences by the Chinese thus confirms a generally agreed-upon interpretation of cultural exchange: when a foreign element is accepted relatively easily by a culture into which it has been introduced, that acceptance is owing to the presence of some internal disposition or movement to accept the new element. What is true in the field of the sciences is true also with respect to the moral teachings of the Jesuits, which were accepted because they fitted the quest of the Donglin thinkers for a heteronomous morality.

Moreover, the large-scale translation and publication of Western writings was possible only because the Late Ming had a very developed system of (private) publishing and printing. Thus Jesuits did not have to introduce the printing press. Moreover, by contrast with Europe, there was no pre-printing censorship in China. As a result, the Chinese context enabled the Jesuits fully to put into practice their 'Apostolate through Books'[25] and <https://assignbuster.com/matteo-ricci/>

freely to express their ideas. 4. Tolerance towards Confucian rites. Here too the cultural imperative of the Other played a determining role (as it did not in Japan).

Because of the power of Confucianism as a diffused religion, Christianity, just like Buddhism, Judaism and other marginal religions, had to accept the state orthodoxy and the ritual traditions of Confucianism. The repeated and public rejection of the rites approved by the State (and listed in the Official ‘ Canon of Sacrifices’) would have caused the missionaries to be labelled ‘ heterodox’ and to be rejected (as happened later to missionaries and papal delegations on several occasions during the Rites Controversy).

Yet, during the initial years of the Ricci period there was a whole evolution in their attitude, which became more tolerant due to the presence of the Other. This can clearly be observed from the attitude of the missionaries towards funerals, which were and still are the most important ritual of passage in China. [26] In the beginning, the Jesuits were hardly aware that the importance of funeral rites in China would have consequences for themselves.

For instance, when Antonio de Almeida (1557-1591), died in Shaozhou (Guangdong), the Chinese could not understand why Ricci and his companions did not wear a mourning garb. The Jesuits, Ricci says, explained that ‘ we religious, when we enter into religion, are as though dead to the world, and therefore we do not make such a thing of this fate. ’ Thus the Jesuits did not accommodate to local customs, except for purchasing a first-class coffin, ‘ in order to show to the Chinese the quality of the Fathers, because herein they demonstrate their way of honouring the dead. The

major reason for buying a coffin, however, according to Ricci's explanation, was that they could not bury de Almeida in a church, as would have been done in Europe and the Jesuits did not want to follow the Chinese practice of burying him ' on a hill far away from the house. ' Subsequently the coffin was kept in their residence for two years until he was buried in Macao. [27] As far as the specific funerary rituals are concerned, in these early years the Jesuits adopted an approach that can be qualified as purist concerning the Christian tradition and exclusivist with regard to the Chinese traditions.

In general, Ricci and his fellow Jesuits were less tolerant in the early stages of their missionary activities than later, though in doing so they did not adhere to a specific regulation. If death occurred, the Jesuits' priority was to bury the deceased – Chinese Christian or foreign missionary – according to Christian rites. There was little intention towards accommodation to local – usually Confucian – customs. The abstention from local rites by Christians was seen by the Jesuits as a sign helping to strengthen and spread the Christian faith.

Only gradually were some Chinese funerary customs accepted. This happened first through the initiative of the Chinese themselves and was largely due to the network in which the deceased Jesuit or Christian had been involved. As long as this network was very small, the funeral could be limited to an exclusively Christian ceremony. When this network was larger, however, the chances of interaction with Chinese funeral practices increased. It is typical for funerals to be such an ' open' ritual.

For instance, when the Jesuit Joao Soerio died in Nanchang in 1607, his fellow Jesuits did ' not give expression to their sentiments, as was usual in China,'

because ' it did not correspond to our profession. ' Yet their friends, dressed in mourning, came to their house to condole with them. These Chinese friends installed a bier and covered it as if his body was there. ' They made four genuflections, and touched each time with their head the ground. ' Many are said to have mourned the death of this Jesuit in this traditional way. 28] As the Christian communities continued to grow, the interaction with local rituals increased as well. The death of Matteo Ricci in Beijing in 1610 was a turning point in some ways, because his funeral and burial were the cause of the Jesuits themselves becoming involved in more Chinese funerary customs. The first critical step was the decision about his burial place. At the initiative of a Christian convert, the Jesuits asked the Chinese emperor to offer an appropriate burial ground. This burial in the mainland was contrary to the practice of the burials of Jesuits in Macao until then.

Meanwhile, Ricci's corpse was kept in a traditional Chinese coffin. While some Chinese practices, such as the habit of condolence, were accepted, others, such as the funeral procession, were only applied in a limited way, because the Chinese procession was considered to resemble an act of ' triumph' and did not conform to Jesuit ideals of poverty and modesty. On the day of the burial itself, 1 November 1611, all the regular Christian ceremonies were celebrated: the recitation of the Office of the Dead, the funeral Mass, an ecclesiastical procession, and the prayers at the tomb in front of a painting of Christ.

But in the end, there were also some Chinese rites: ' Many days afterwards gentile friends came flocking in to perform their usual rites for the deceased. '[29] Thus it was the presence of the Chinese that brought gradual change in

the hesitant approach by the missionaries. As Johannes Bettray has shown, the Jesuits missionaries were, after thirty years of presence in China, apparently allowing the performance of these particular local customs. [30]

Conclusion Looking at Ricci, one can discern several characteristics that can be labelled the ' Ricci method'.

However, this method has too often been presented as the result of the proactive Self, at the neglect of the influence of the Chinese Other. I have tried to show that the role of the Other in the formation of Ricci's identity is certainly as important as the activity of Ricci's Self. Though Ricci might have reacted in ways other than he did, in all cases the Other played a decisive role in the reactions he showed. One could even argue that the Other made it possible for Ricci to become who he became. Without the Other, this would not have been possible.