

# Speaking of God in China

Matteo Ricci's inspirations for today<sup>1</sup>

by Gianni Criveller

During the late period of Chinese Ming dynasty (XVI century), the Pearl River city of Zhaoqing 肇慶, in the southern province of Guangdong, enjoyed a special authorization for trading with the Portuguese in Macao. In 1583, two Italian missionaries of the Society of Jesus, Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607) and Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), obtained permission from the Prefect Wang Pan 王泮 to establish the first Catholic residence on the Mainland. From Zhaoqing, Ricci continued his ›ascent‹ to Beijing, establishing along the way three more residences. Reaching Beijing was a crucial feature of Ricci's strategy. He arrived at the capital in 1601, and he died there in 1610, after realizing one of the most fascinating religious and cultural adventures in human history.

Ricci was a missionary who never gave up elaborating strategies to achieve his objectives. His enterprise and his methodology hold relevant insights for us today. In this paper, I will present some aspects of Ricci's mission that seem to me particularly relevant both for evangelization and for China today. The first aspect is the absolute necessity for ›inculturation‹, called ›accommodation‹ by Ricci. I will illustrate Ricci's engagement first with Buddhism and then with Confucianism; and the effort of naming God in a way that would make sense to the Chinese. I will then present the topics of reason and faith as the two major ways through which Ricci communicated the Christian message to the Chinese. He did so by looking for the ›light of reason‹ in Chinese classics, and writing two different kinds of religious books. These were catechisms and Christian doctrines, and they were aimed at different audiences. The Chinese cultural elite was enamored of communication through books and images: therefore Ricci exerted his utmost effort creating visual products such as books and maps.

China, nowadays, is a hotbed of new cultural, social and religious phenomena. A sense for a change is felt today, somewhat similar to the late Ming period, which led to the collapse of the last Chinese dynasty and the rise of the Manchu-Qing dynasty. The phenomena of Christianity fever in twenty first century Chinese society and the movement of the Cultural Christians in academic institutions are two significant elements of today's cultural and religious landscape. Ricci's attention to the religious context; the emphasis he put on communicating through the most advanced media and the positive relationship he drew between faith and science, is very much relevant for today's China. Public education is imbued with atheist scientism, which condemns religious belief as unscientific and false. Ricci defined both Christian faith and science as »Heavenly Studies«, *tianxue* 天學. As a consequence

1 The present text is based on previously published essays by the author. In particular: Gianni CRIVELLER, *Matteo Ricci, Missione e Ragione*, Milano 2010; ID., *Parlare di Dio in cinese. La lezione di Matteo Ricci per i nostri giorni*, in: *Credere Oggi* 2 (2007) 95-106; ID., *Portrait of a Jesuit, Matteo Ricci, Macao 2010*; ID., *The Missionary Method of Matteo*

Ricci, in: *Tripod* 158 (2010) 13-54; Sources: *Fonti Ricciane*: Documenti originali concernenti Matteo Ricci e la storia dell'introduzione del Cristianesimo in Cina, ed. Pasquale M. D'ELIA, SJ, 3 vols., Rome 1942-1949. These volumes contain Ricci's account of his mission in China, written in 1609-1610, entitled: *Della entrata della compagnia di Gesù* e

*Christianità nella Cina*; Matteo RICCI, *Lettere* (1580-1609), ed. Francesco D'ARELLI, Macerata 2001.

2 Ricci to Costa, Nanjing 14 August 1599, in: RICCI, *Lettere* (note 1), 361-362. All translations from Italian are my own.

3 Ibid., 362.

4 Ricci to Costa, Beijing 6 March 1608, in: RICCI, *Lettere* (note 1), 455.



his scientific production resulted as an integral part of his mission of evangelization. This approach would inspire contemporary Chinese people to look at the relationship between science and religious faith from a new perspective.

Finally, there is one word that might summarize Ricci's humanistic approach and missionary method: friendship. Ricci, so different from most of his contemporaries, was extraneous to any arrogance and aggressive attitude toward the »other one« and the »different one«. Friendship was the virtue that allowed him deep penetration into a society that appeared, at the beginning, so different and distant. Mission as inculturation, as cultural dialogue and as friendship: these are inspirations deriving from Matteo Ricci's legacy.

## 1 Paul and Matteo

Matteo Ricci was indeed an ingenious missionary, and one capable of marking an epoch in evangelization. I am struck by the various points of contact between the missionary strategies of Matteo Ricci and Paul of Tarsus. Both had precise objectives, which they sought to achieve with great determination. They were flexible about the means of accomplishing them, adapting strategies and approaches to their various situations and experiences. They learned from mistakes and failures without ever losing sight of their goals of preaching the Gospel and founding Christian communities.

Ricci and Paul did not aim to baptize everyone they happened to meet. Paul even boasted of the fact that he did not baptize many people, (1 Cor 1:14-17). Similarly Ricci did not baptized extensively, as his successors would have done. Both Paul and Matteo spent their energies at creating well-founded Christian communities, which were self-sufficient and able to expand by creating new areas of evangelization. These communities were located in the most important urban centers. The major cities were thus preferred over small towns and the countryside.

Ricci aimed at influencing Chinese society as a whole and at establishing small and legitimated Christian communities, able to expand in freedom and security. Obtaining the trust and the approval of the central authorities was a prerequisite leading to mass conversions among the population at large. After securing the toleration of Christianity from the authorities, it would be safe to evangelize the population at large all over China.

On August 14, 1599, Ricci wrote with amazing clarity and openness to his friend, Gerolamo Costa, rejecting criticism from those who pointed out that progress in China was much slower than in other missions. »We can be very successful here and can even be considered superior to the other missions that are said to produce wonderful things. Here in China, this is not the time for either reaping or even sowing, but of opening the wild woods [...]. Others will come and they, with the grace of the Lord, will write about conversions and the fervor of the Christians, but you should know that it is first necessary to do what we do. [...] It seems to us that the best result that we can achieve at the present state of this enterprise is to gain, little by little, the respect of the people and to remove any suspicion on their part. Only then, can we hope for conversions. In this matter, by the grace of the Lord, we achieved much more in a few years than one could have hoped to achieve in many years. After all, China is China.«<sup>2</sup>

Once the freedom to preach was granted, Ricci believed that it would be possible to »convert an infinite multitude of them in a short time«.<sup>3</sup> In 1608, writing to Costa again, Ricci reiterated the notion that »in these beginning times it is more useful to have few, but good, converts, rather than many, who may be less suited to carrying the Christian name«.<sup>4</sup>



A similar concept was expressed on August 22, 1608, in a letter to Superior General Claudio Acquaviva: »Father, please consider that the success of our apostolate here is not to be evaluated from the number of Christians only, but from the foundation we are establishing for a very big enterprise«. <sup>5</sup>

Paul of Tarsus never lost sight of the importance of the connection with Jerusalem, and similarly Ricci never lost contact with Rome. He spent his nights, as his biographers tell us, writing long and numerous reports and letters. Time and energy were spent translating the cultural, scientific, humanistic, philosophical and religious experiences he acquired at the Roman College into Chinese. This was an exhausting work, which surely shortened his life.

Paul aimed at Rome, the final destination of his mission, to the point that his missionary activity can be interpreted as a progressive move toward Rome. At least Luke offers this interpretation of Paul's mission: a journey, an ideal and material gleaned from his experiences on his way from Jerusalem to Rome.

Similarly Ricci made his mission an ascent from Macao to Beijing, the capital of Chinese Empire, founding Christian communities in main cities located in that directional line: Zhaoqing, Shaozhou (today Shaoguan), Nanchang and Nanjing. In 1595, following the drowning of his Chinese companion, Joao Barradas, the impossibility of continuing to travel to Beijing with Minister Shi Lou (identified by the Jesuit sinologist Pasquale d'Elia as Shi Xing 石星) and the failure of his first entrance into Nanjing, caused Ricci to suffer a moment of great despair. As occasionally happened to Paul, Ricci said that he overcame that difficulty through a dream. It took place on June 25 or 26, 1595, and was related in Ricci's biography written in Chinese by Giulio Aleni in 1630. Ricci, himself, recalled the dream on two occasions. The first was in a letter to Gerolamo Costa on October 28, 1595, only 4 months after the dream; the second mention of it was in 1609, in his account *Della entrata*. <sup>6</sup> The narration in the letter to Costa is particularly interesting because when Ricci wrote it, he could not possibly have known whether the prediction would be fulfilled or not. The missionary wrote that an unknown man, who identified himself as the Lord, encouraged him, promising him that he would finally settle in the capital. The dialogue ends with these words: »Then I threw myself at his feet, and weeping bitterly, I said: »So, Lord, since you knew this, why you did not help me until now?« He answered: »You will go to that city – and it seems that he showed me Beijing – and I will help you there.« <sup>7</sup>

This dream echoes Ignatius of Loyola's vision in La Storta (Rome) in 1537, but it calls to mind also two visions of the Apostle Paul, mentioned by Luke in Acts: the »Macedonian man« (Acts 16:19), and especially, »Jesus« prediction about Paul going to Rome (Acts 23:11).

In 1597, Valignano appointed Ricci as Superior of the Mission in China, and strongly urged him to »enter the King's Court in Beijing, because the permanence of the Fathers' residence in China would never be secure until it was approved by the King«. <sup>8</sup> After the failed attempt of 1598, Ricci completed the seventh and final stage of his journey, reaching the capital, Beijing, in January 1601. In the capital Ricci's aimed at obtaining from the Emperor the permission to preach the Gospel in freedom and security. Emperor's formal permission for Christian preaching was not obtained. However the same result was in fact achieved when, after Ricci's death in Beijing, a piece of state land was granted for his burial. That meant that Christianity was going to stay in Chinese society.

<sup>5</sup> Ricci to Acquaviva, Beijing 22 August 1608, in: RICCI, *Lettere* (note 1), 496.

<sup>6</sup> *Fonti Ricciane* (note 1), I, 355-356.

<sup>7</sup> Ricci to Costa, Nanchang 28 October 1595, in RICCI, *Lettere* (note 1), 290.

<sup>8</sup> *Fonti Ricciane* (note 1), II, 4.



## 2 Dressed in Buddhist fashion

When taking up residence in Zhaoqing Ricci and Ruggieri shaved their heads and dressed in Buddhist-style robes. Only under these conditions could the local prefect justify their presence, which was otherwise not admissible under imperial law. In traditional society there was hardly such a thing as casual clothing: everyone's identity had to be identified by his/her dress. Wearing Buddhist-like robes was also a sign that theirs was a religious and not a commercial or military mission as people, knowing about the Portuguese outpost of Macao, might otherwise suspect. Ricci and Ruggieri did not know that a millennium before, Christian missionaries to China had experienced something similar. Monks of the Eastern Syrian Church coming from Baghdad traveled along the Silk Road, a route where people met and different cultures and religions interacted, and arrived in to Changan, capital of the Tang Dynasty (near present-day Xian) in the year 635. Buddhist monks translating Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit helped Christian monks to translate into Chinese the Christian texts they brought with themselves. As a consequence, first Chinese-Christian texts in VII-VIII centuries adopted Buddhist and Taoist terminology to express Christian concepts.

But let's return to Ming China. Coincidentally, Zhaoqing's prefect request for the missionaries to dress as Buddhist monks matched the directives from Jesuit Visitor for Asia Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606), who promoted accommodation (called by him *modo soave*, 'gentle way') as the new missionary policy for East Asia.

The accommodation method, central in Jesuit missionary activity, is a concept that has its theological roots in Thomist thought and in the writings of Erasmus of Rotterdam. According to Elisabetta Corsi it was an instrument or a hermeneutical device, particularly apt to address complex religious and cultural challenges, and their doctrinal implications.

On their Zhaoqing residence, near to a famous pagoda, the Italian missionaries hung two dedicatory plaques with the words 僊花寺 Xianhua Si, 'Temple of the Immortal's Flower' and 西來淨土 Xilai Jingtū, 'Pure Land from the West': these expressions clearly belong to Buddhist and Taoist terminology. In fact, the local population referred to the missionaries as 和尚 heshang or 僧 seng, Buddhist monks. The missionaries introduced themselves as 'Buddhist monks from India' (天竺國僧 Tianzhuguo seng) or 'monks from the Western Pure Land' (西來淨土和尚 Xilai Jingtū heshang). In the eyes of most people, the missionaries might have appeared as true Buddhists, possibly the initiators of a new Buddhist school, among the dozen already in existence.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Ricci and Ruggieri acted as Buddhist monks and did not proclaim their Christian faith. In fact sources prove that in the early days, Ricci and Ruggieri were rather traditional in their preaching. Only later did Ricci, who was a pragmatic man, partially change this initial method, adapting it to the context in which he lived and to new circumstances. Ricci did not initiate his mission with a predefined strategy, he rather learned from accidents, mistakes and from opponents. He took advice from Chinese friends and associates and continued a systematic study of Chinese culture. His strategy and method changed in accordance with what he learned through experience. In this respect he was a humanist of the Renaissance, an early modern pragmatic man. He was devoted to his cause, tenacious in his objectives, and flexible in his methods.



### 3 Dressed like a Confucian literatus

Ricci, a man of letters and not a monk or a mystic, did not act like a Buddhist monk, and he did not feel at ease appearing like one. He felt much more at home as a citizen of the humanistic culture, as a *literatus*. After years of studying the classics, Ricci was ready for a change, for a new role in society. In the mid 1590s Ricci adopted the dress of the Confucian scholars, following the advice of his friends; with the permission of his Superior Valignano and especially acting in accordance with his philosophical and humanistic training. From then on, Ricci looked at Confucianism as a point of contact with his preaching and adopted a very critical attitude towards Buddhism and Taoism. His approach toward Chinese culture and religion is best summarized by the four-character sentence: 補儒易佛 *buru yifo*, 'perfect Confucianism and displace Buddhism'.

As for Confucianism, Ricci noted that many passages in the Chinese classic texts were in harmony with Christian teaching. In his main writing, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (天主實義 *Tianzhu Shiyi*, 1603), Ricci offered a Christian representation of Chinese cultural and religious context, based on his own original interpretation of the Chinese classics. In 1609, in a letter to the Vice Provincial Francesco Pasio in Japan, Ricci gave a theological interpretation of the Confucian texts: »By carefully examining all these books, we shall find very few matters against the light of reason and very many conformable to it. [...] And we can very much hope in the divine mercy that many of their ancestors have been saved by observing the natural law with the help that God shall grant from his goodness.«<sup>9</sup>

Ricci proposed a parallel between the relationship of Christianity with Greco-Roman culture and that of Christianity with Confucianism, beginning a process of inculturation, which had the same dignity and difficulties of inculturation in the Greek-Latin world. The communality between Confucianism and Christianity is »the light of reason«; »the natural light«. In *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, Ricci illustrates the doctrines that »in some way, can be proved by natural reason and understood with the natural enlightenment.«<sup>10</sup>

In accordance with reason was Mencius (371-289 BC), who stated that »He who has completely developed his mind, knows his nature. He who knows his nature, knows Heaven« (Book 7, Part 1, Chapter 1). Confucius, according to Ricci, was »another Seneca«, and the Four Books »good moral documents«. The distinction between the original teaching of the Classics and the later Neo-Confucian commentaries is a key point in Ricci's understanding of Chinese thought as he asserted that ancient Chinese believed in God the creator. The ancient terms 上帝 *Shangdi*, »Sovereign from above«, and 天 *Tian*, »Heaven«, are not impersonal and immanent but personal and transcendent. Therefore Ricci adopted the terms *Shangdi* and *Tian*, together with the neologism, at least then it was perceived as such, and *Tianzhu*, »Lord of Heaven«, to translate the name of God. Ricci rejected as immanent and materialist Neo-Confucianism, the dominant philosophical movement derived from commentaries of Zhu Xi (1130-1200), which allowed Confucian thought to be contaminated by Buddhist and Taoist doctrines.

<sup>9</sup> Ricci to Francesco Pasio, Beijing, 15 February 1609, in RICCI, *Lettere* (not 1), 518.

<sup>10</sup> *Fonti Ricciane* (note 1), II, 289-298.

<sup>11</sup> Ricci to Acquaviva, Beijing, 8 March 1608, in: RICCI, *Lettere* (note 1), 470.

<sup>12</sup> Ricci to Pasio, Beijing 15 February 1609, in: RICCI, *Lettere* (note 1), 419.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 417.



#### 4 The Great Father-Mother

One of the most remarkable terms employed by Ricci and his companions from the early days of their mission to name God was *Da Fumu* 大父母 or 'Great Father-Mother'. This expression then occurred frequently in Chinese Christian literature used both by the missionaries, especially Giulio Aleni, and by the converts, particularly Yang Tingyun 楊廷筠 and Wang Zheng 王徵. The term's recondite origin is in Chinese cosmogony, where the concept of yang 陽, male element, and yin 陰, female element, are quite central. Great Father-Mother is a term that designated both the emperor and the local authorities.

Yang Tingyun, one of the pillars of the early Chinese Catholic Church, developed a Christian interpretation of this typical Chinese expression. To regard the universe as one's own Father and Mother implies that all human beings should be regarded as one's own brothers and sisters. The term also refers to the relationship between parent and child, which reflects the close relationship between God and humankind. The abandonment of the term Great Father-Mother is particularly regrettable in view of the search for inclusive language in contemporary theology, a language that wishes to avoid any masculine connotation of God.

#### 5 »Books speak better than the mouth«

In the kingdom of China, where 'letters are very precious', Ricci considered writing and printing books as an essential element in the success of his mission. This was stated plainly in one of his last letters to the General Claudio Acquaviva, written in Beijing on March 8, 1608: »For this purpose, I do everything possible so that all our fathers diligently study the Chinese books and strive to learn to write in Chinese. Because, indeed, although it seems incredible [to many Europeans], in China one can do more with books than with speech.«<sup>11</sup> This conviction was affirmed and articulated in an important letter to Pasio (1609). Ricci said that it was necessary that the missionaries really know the Chinese books, because, for a fruitful apostolate »*knowing our own things but not knowing theirs does not help much, and You, Father, will clearly see how important this point is.*«<sup>12</sup> Ricci emphasized the importance of books, using an evocative picture: »The third point is about how easy it will be to propagate our holy Christian religion through books. They reach everywhere without impediment. They talk to more people, and continuously say things in a fashion more considerate and accurate than one can say orally.«<sup>13</sup>

#### 6 Catechism and Christian Doctrine

One major piece of evidence of accommodation as a hermeneutical device is to be found in Ricci's method of writing religious books and preaching his religious message. In his letters and other writings Ricci illustrates his method based on the sharp distinction between catechism and Christian doctrine, which follows the distinction between reason and faith. Ricci's *Catechism* (i.e. *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*) is a presentation of basic concepts such as the existence of God and the retribution of good and evil, in dialogue with Confucian scholars, and in dispute with Buddhists and Taoists. This presentation is based on the light of reason, shared by all human beings.



The *Christian Doctrine* (天主教要 *Tianzhu jiaoyao*, literally »The Essential Things of the Doctrine of the Lord of Heaven«, 1605) gave a full account of Christian doctrine for catechumens and believers: the doctrine of the Trinity and of Christ, the sacred Scriptures, the sacraments, the precepts of the Church and Christian prayers. These teachings, that lead to the actual faith, needed the presence of the missionary to explain them and to guide the listener into the church.

## 7 Indirect and direct preaching

After becoming an expert in Chinese socio-cultural dynamics, Ricci applied the distinction between reason and faith, between catechism and *Christian doctrine* to his oral preaching. He adopted *indirect preaching* and *direct preaching* according to whether his interlocutors were literati (practice of indirect preaching) or catechumens and neophytes (practice of direct preaching). When practicing indirect preaching in his meetings with the literati, Ricci employed dialogue and disputation in a manner similar to the style of argumentation found in both Chinese and Western classical texts. His conversations initially dealt with scientific, ethical and philosophical topics, elaborating on similar points in Chinese and Western classical texts in support of his arguments. Ricci would then turn the conversations towards a discussion of religious and ethical beliefs, such as the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the reward of good and evil in heaven and hell. In his conversations with visitors and literati, Ricci did not necessarily speak about the beliefs proper to the Catholic faith. A complete catechetical instruction was given only to those who desired to embrace the Catholic religion. Ricci's policy was that specific religious teaching was to be offered only upon request. In this way, consciously or not, Ricci followed the style of Buddhist masters, especially those trained in the Zen school, who offered their teaching only after their disciples proved able to appreciate it.

Clearly the purpose of the written catechisms and of the indirect preaching was to discuss matters of faith; while the purpose of the written Christian doctrines and direct preaching was to teach and practice the faith. The content of the catechisms and indirect preaching could change, according to the writer and speaker, the readership and audience, the circumstances, the culture, and so on. The Christian doctrines and the direct preaching, on the other hand, did not change: they transmitted the non-changeable essentials and the texts were normally printed anonymously, as Ricci did in 1605.

Ricci studied scholastic theology which teaches that doctrines such as the existence of one God and the retribution after death belong to natural revelation and can be accepted with the light of reason, that is, rational arguments. Ricci consciously applied the distinction of scholastic theology between the apologetic presentation (natural revelation) and the dogmatic one (positive revelation); between Reason and Faith, to his religious writings and oral preaching. By understanding this essentially theological distinction, clearly illustrated by Ricci himself, one would avoid an inaccurate evaluation of Ricci's missionary method.

14 Manuel DIAS, 天問略 *Tianwen lue*, in: Li Zhizao (edited in 1626 by)/ 吳相湘 Xiangxiang WU/方豪 Hao FANG (Ed.), 天學初函 *Tianxue Chuhan*, 6 vols, Taipei 1965, V, 2619.  
15 Ibid., V, 2630.

16 Galileo GALILEI, *Il Saggiatore*, Milan 1965, 38 (translation from Italian by the author).

17 *Fonti Ricciane* (note 1), I, 208.



## 8 The Scientific Apostolate

Modern critics have charged Ricci with the accusation of manipulating science as a trick to get conversions. This allegation has no ground. Science was much more than a tool; it was part of the Jesuit humanistic and theological vision of the world. Ricci's advanced scientific training at the Roman College, where he was a pupil of scientists such as Christopher Clavius, would prove otherwise. The presentation of Western knowledge was meant to elevate Ricci's and his companions' personal prestige and to show the value of Western culture and, consequently, the value of the missionaries' religious doctrine. Introducing themselves as scholars of material heaven, they hoped to be trusted as scholars of the metaphysical Heaven as well.

Matteo Ricci has been occasionally charged with mixing astronomy and theology. However, such an accusation is anachronistic since the rigid religion-science dichotomy was unknown in the early seventeenth century. In fact, it is not universally accepted by contemporary scientists either. 天學初函 *Tianxue chuhan* (First collection of heavenly studies) is the title of a compilation from 1626 of twenty previously independent writings on 天學 *tianxue* or 'heavenly studies' edited by 李之藻 *Li Zhizao*. Heaven is the object of the studies, and understood in a broad sense: studies concerning heaven (the sky, i.e. astronomy) and Heaven (God, i.e. theology). The modern division, or even the opposition, of two branches of learning does not belong to seventeenth-century science. The Jesuit China missionary Manuel Dias explained his concept of 'heavenly studies' in the preface to his 天問略 *Tianwen lue* (Treatise on astronomy; published in Beijing, 1615).<sup>14</sup> *Tianxue* links Heaven, the Creator, to the study of the heavens, his creation. The Creator set the heavens revolving, and astronomy (天文 *tianwen*) is the science of observing the movements of the heavens but also relates to theology (天主事 *Tianzhu shi*) since 天主 *Tianzhu* (Lord of Heaven) is its origin and its final fulfilment (益學永學 *yixue yongxue*).<sup>15</sup> Again it is evident that in sixteenth and seventeenth European academic training 'secular' and 'sacred' sciences are not separated and opposed to each other but rather part of a unified and coherent curriculum. Astronomy belonged to mathematics; mathematics to philosophy, and philosophy was propaedeutic to theology, the last and highest-ranking of the academic disciplines. Galileo's saying in *The Assayer* that 'The universe cannot be understood without first learning the language and the characters in which it is written. It is written in mathematical language,'<sup>16</sup> also shows that mathematics and astronomy were perceived in relation to theology, not in opposition to it.

Ricci and his fellow Jesuits considered their religious message and European science an integrated whole, precisely called 'heavenly studies', where science and theology supported each other and both were presented in rational terms. For the Jesuits and Chinese converts this was self-evident, while a number of Chinese literati opted for a separation: they showed an interest in European sciences and their practical application, while remaining indifferent or even objecting to the 'superstitious talk' about the Lord of Heaven.

A similar meaning had Ricci's well-known activity of mapping. He called the map »*the best and most useful work that could have been done at this time to enable China to give credit to the things of our Holy Faith*«<sup>17</sup>. Ricci produced six editions of his famous map. This experience was cultural, scientific and religious. Drawing maps of the Earth was not only a tool of missionary strategy, but involved a religious worldview. For the Jesuit cartographer, maps were not only a visual representation of geography, but they were



a way to know and understand the work of creation. Understanding the universe with scientific accuracy meant knowing God and creation. Knowing the Earth and drawing it on a map meant participating in the work of creation.

In his map, Ricci did not put China at the center of the world, nor did he represent it as larger than other countries. The central meridian falls in eastern Japan, leaving Europe, Africa and Asia in the west (i. e. to the left of the observer) and North and South America in the east (i. e. to the right of the observer).

It is well known that Ricci introduced various European scientific notions into China from disciplines such as mathematics, astronomy, calendrical calculation, geography, cartography, medicine, physics, architecture, linguistics, phonetics, philosophy, morals, fine arts, music, and, of course, theology. Ricci is seen by many as an agent of cultural and scientific exchange only. However, he was, of course, much more than that. Some studies on Ricci are contaminated, although this is not always plainly stated, with an underlying somewhat odd ideology: Ricci was a great man of science and culture not because he was a missionary but in spite of being a missionary.

## 9 Missionaries without Christ?

After nearly twenty years in China, Ricci adopted a policy of no public display of the crucifix. One incident was particularly important in shaping his attitude in this respect. It occurred in Linqing (near Tianjin) when the eunuch Ma Tang 馬堂 inspected Ricci's luggage en route to Beijing in 1600. Among the gifts for the Emperor there was a crucifix, and Ma Tang misunderstood it as a black magic tool meant harming the Emperor. A six month-long detention followed this worrisome incident, and Ricci became convinced that the crucifix should not be displayed without explaining its true meaning.

Most Franciscan and Dominican friars, active in China since 1632, adopted street preaching, which was common in New Spain (now Mexico), South America and the Philippines. The street preaching consisted of the open and direct proclamation of Jesus as the savior of humanity by a preacher holding a crucifix in his hand and standing in a public space such as a square, a crossroads or a market. Such a preaching style was a replica of European internal missions.

However, Ricci did not suppress the event of the crucifixion in his preaching. As we mentioned above, his book on *Christian Doctrine* and his ›direct‹ preaching to catechumens and christians included the narration of the Passion of the Lord. Only that, following the practice of the Christians of the early centuries, when crucifixes were not fashioned or displayed, Ricci was prudent in displaying the crucifix in order not to provoke the contempt and the confusion of those who would not understand it without an adequate explanation of its meaning for salvation.

18 Savio HON TAIFAI, On Faith and Reason from *De Amicitia* of Matteo Ricci, in: *The 1st International Fu Jen Academia Catholica Conference: Interdisciplinary Dialogue on Catholic Studies* (Taipei: Fujen University May 1-2, 2009), Conference Papers: 2.1-2.31 (i. e. first day, second talk, pp. 1-31).

19 *Fonti Ricciane* (note 1), I, CXXXI.



## 10 The Door of Friendship

If one word could summarize Ricci's approach to China, that word would be friendship, a humanistic value that Ricci greatly appreciated and cherished with a wide circle of friends, both European and Chinese. He always kept in contact with them, as is manifested by his extensive correspondence. According to the contemporary Jesuit sinologist, Edward Malatesta, Ricci was even a martyr of friendship. His early death, on May 11, 1610 at the age of 57, was due to overwork in receiving friends and guests and reciprocating their visits. In those days many *literati* (a term Ricci coined for the scholar-official class) from all over the country would go to Beijing for the imperial examinations. Many of them desired to visit the learned man from the West, famous for his writings.

*On Friendship*, 交友論 *Jiaoyou lun*, was, with the exception of the world map, the first book that Ricci wrote in Chinese. Published towards the end of 1595, the first version contained 76 maxims on friendship by Western authors. In the edition published by 馮應京 Feng Yingjing in 1601 the number of maxims was increased to 100. In his preface, Ricci describes the genesis of the book. It was written at the request of 朱多櫛 Zhu Duojie, 建安王 Prince of Jian'an, who resided in Nanchang. Ricci admitted that the request was a ›pretence‹ and served a literary purpose. To Ricci's surprise, the book was very well in by contemporary literati, including the celebrated anti-traditionalist thinker Li Zhi, who copied and sent it to friends all over the country.<sup>18</sup>

Ricci collected the quotations from Christian and non-Christian authors and philosophers, both ancient and contemporary. He stated that he modified some sentences to adapt them to the taste and understanding of Chinese readers (we will return later on to the question of ›accommodation‹). The maxims do not seem to have a specific order: they can be used individually and independently, are focused on friendship and contain soul-searching wisdom. The way Ricci chose to put them together seems to be inspired by Seneca or even by Confucius himself. Ricci's Chinese friends and acquaintances obviously cherished his love of learning, desire for truth, and esteem of friendship, values to be found also in their own ancient culture. Friendship is one of the five cardinal relationships in Confucian social thought, a relationship based on voluntary participation, and not on common status, shared profession, or family membership. Friendship enabled a person to enrich his web of relationships, going beyond customary contacts. In late Ming China, friendship was reappraised as a great social virtue, and the thinker 何心隱 He Xinyin (1517-79) had advocated friendship as a help to foster a sense of unity and responsibility of the individual toward the nation and as an antidote to declining social strength and cohesion.

Having received a humanist Renaissance education, Ricci found himself very much at home in this spirit of re-visiting the classics and must have felt at home in a world so distant and yet apparently so close to him. Ricci and his Chinese friends saw in friendship a precious common meeting point between two worlds that shared a humanistic approach to life. Common elements of this unique encounter were: a pre-eminence of cultural cultivation, a love for philosophy and science, a preference for moral and practical discussions over dogma, participation in social relationships based on common intellectual interests and friendship, and a prominent role exercised by cultural institutions such as schools, academies and associations. Two among the most celebrated civilizations of all time, the Chinese Ming dynasty and the European Renaissance, met through the bond of friendship.

*On Friendship* can therefore be considered a manifesto of Ricci's project: to enter China not by violence, as a few ecclesiastics in Manila and Macao had actually suggested, but



through the peaceful door of friendship. The successful booklet compiled in Nanchang allowed Ricci to open that door.

According to the reports of the Jesuits Ricci last words before his death recalled the image of the door: ›I leave to you a door open to great merits, but also to a great deal of danger and hard work.‹<sup>19</sup> Friendship was the door opened by Ricci, but his successors were not always successful in keeping that door open.

Ricci had many Chinese friends, among whom certainly were Leon Li Zhizao and Paul Xu Guangqi, the pillars and the fathers of the Chinese Church. But from Ricci's writings, we see that he was perhaps even more emotionally attached to other people, including Ignatius Qu Taisu 瞿太素, ›my old and great friend‹. Qu was a character greater than life, and was baptized only after a dozen years of waiting. He was very close to Ricci in so many difficult ways, and it was he who advised Ricci to wear clothes similar to that of literati. Another person for whom Ricci felt strong feelings of friendship and solidarity was Feng Yingjing 馮應京, an important collaborator of Ricci, who suffered the injustice of prison. He died without baptism, and Ricci had moving words of hope for Feng's salvation. These words describe Ricci's confidence in the eternal destiny of righteous persons, against the prevailing pessimism of most of European theology: ›May God count as baptism and grant him the salvation of his soul for the good he did to us, the great desire he showed to participate in the propagation of our Holy Faith, and to actually follow it.‹<sup>20</sup>

The fact that Matteo Ricci and his Superior Alessandro Valignano were bound by a strong friendship had an extraordinary positive impact in the successful commencing of China Mission, which would be, after the death of Valignano and Ricci torn apart and eventually destroyed by animosities and controversies. Ricci was generous enough to point to his friend, Visitor Valignano, as ›the first author of this mission‹ [44], ›the first founder of the enterprise in China‹ [45], and then again, ›father of this mission‹ [46]. Valignano's death in Macao in January 1606 was an emotional blow to Ricci. In a letter to the Superior General Claudio Acquaviva, Ricci wrote the following moving words: ›This year, besides other trials, which are never lacking, we had this huge one of the death of Fr Valignano, the father of the mission. His loss leaves us as orphans, and I don't know how, Holy Father, you can ever replace him.‹<sup>21</sup>

The collaboration between the two missionaries was so successful that it is almost impossible to distinguish the choices made by Ricci from the instructions given by Valignano. Such unity of vision and action is rarely to be found among other missionaries. The reciprocal esteem, friendship and solidarity, together with the identity of views and projects, make the human, religious and intellectual venture of Ricci and Valignano something not at all common in the modern missionary history of China and beyond, and it still commands our respect.

20 *Fonti Ricciane* (note 1), II, 168.

21 Ricci to Acquaviva, Beijing, 15 August 1606, in: RICCI, *Lettere* (note 1), 423.



### **Zusammenfassung**

Zwischen dem Chinamissionar Matteo Ricci und dem Völkerapostel Paulus lassen sich viele Parallelen ziehen, nicht nur, dass beide klare Ziele vor Augen hatten (Rom und Peking). Auf dem Weg in die kaiserliche Hauptstadt des Reiches der Mitte bediente sich Ricci der so genannten Akkomodationsmethode (Kleidung, theologisches Vokabular, usw.) Diese Herangehensweise hat Wurzeln in Scholastik (Thomas von Aquin) und Humanismus (Erasmus). Besonderes Augenmerk wurde von Ricci auf das Apostolat des Buches gelegt; dasjenige Opus mit Aphorismen über die Freundschaft gilt als ein Höhepunkt seines Schaffens und zudem auch als menschliches Vermächtnis, das uns auch heute noch hohen Respekt abringt.

### **Abstract**

Many parallels can be drawn between Matteo Ricci, the missionary to China, and Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, among others that they both had clear goals in sight (Rome and Peking). On his way to the imperial capital of the Middle Kingdom Ricci availed himself of the so-called method of accommodation (clothing, theological vocabulary, etc.). This strategy has roots in scholasticism (Thomas Aquinas) and humanism (Erasmus). Ricci paid particular attention to the apostolate of the book; his opus with aphorisms on friendship is regarded as the high point of his creative work and furthermore as a human legacy that elicits great respect from us even to this day.

---