RICCI, Matteo

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1552–1610 Missionary and scholar

A missionary respected for his expert knowledge of China and the West, Matteo Ricci was the first Jesuit to live in Beijing. His deep understanding and tolerance for Chinese beliefs aided his missionary work and allowed for a greater acceptance of Catholicism among his converts.

Matteo Ricci (Li Madou) was the first Jesuit to reside in Beijing. Among his converts were noted Chinese scholars such as Xu Guangqi. Using Allessandro Valignano’s (1539–1606) accommodation method, which demanded missionaries to show respect of local cultures, Ricci paved the way for generations of Jesuit scholar-missionaries, with their technical expertise in mathematics and astronomy, to serve the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and Qing dynasty (1644–1912) governments. To this day Ricci’s name stands for a cross-cultural dialogue based on mutual understanding and respect in both China and the West.

Born in Mazzerata, Italy, in 1552, Ricci joined the Jesuit order in 1571. At the Collegio Romano he received an education in theology, the sciences, and the humanities representative of the broad interests of the Renaissance period. Among his teachers and subsequent friends was the mathematician Christopher Clavius, designer of the Gregorian calendar. Clavius’s course in mathematics included its practical application in astronomy and timekeeping, geography and surveying, optics and music—skills that greatly enhanced Ricci’s reputation in China.

After years as a missionary apprentice in Portuguese-controlled Goa, Ricci was selected by Valignano to join Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607) in the conversion of China through the accommodation method. Ricci first entered China in 1583. He was allowed to reside in Beijing in 1601, where he died. Ricci’s tomb can still be found in Beijing today (12 Maweigou Road, Fuchengmen district).

Ricci reached Beijing as an expert in both Chinese and Western knowledge (xixue). In dress and lifestyle, in all but his celibate state, Ricci had followed the model of a Chinese scholar and gentleman since 1594. He had also memorized the Confucian canon and had demonstrated a deep understanding of Chinese literary style and argument in his publications Tianzhushiyi (The true Meaning of the Lord of Heaven) and Jiaoyoulun (Treatise on Friendship, 1596). He had created the first world map (mappomondo in Italian, kunyu wanguo quantu in Chinese) with China at its center, which had been widely copied and distributed. He had also translated the Greek geometer Euclid into Chinese and introduced his teacher Clavius as the Renaissance Euclid. He impressed his friends with inventions such as the astrolabe (an instrument used to observe and calculate the position of celestial bodies before the invention of the sextant). A gift of two clocks that struck on the hour, a painting that used the technique of perspective (unused by Chinese artists at the time), and a musical instrument called a spinet gained him access to the emperor and the palace. Through his openness, wisdom, and integrity Ricci won the trust of educated Chinese at a time when the weakened state of the Ming government, paired with foreign military encroachment, strengthened
xenophobic tendencies. Most of his friends and converts among the literati had ties to the tonglin group striving for government reforms.

Ricci’s contributions to Catholic missions in China are manifold. Limiting his association with Portuguese and Spanish colonial settlements while in China allowed him to present his missionary work in the light of cultural exchange rather than as part of colonial conquest. Ricci presented Catholicism and Western learning, particularly mathematics and astronomy, as an organic whole capable of supplanting Chinese accomplishments in philosophy and science. He was also committed to the basic tenet of the accommodation method: that missionary work needed to understand and respect Chinese culture. Careful interpretation of Chinese texts allowed him to claim an early Chinese monotheism. He thus presented Catholic
Complementing Confucianism

“Lettere dalla China” is a note written by Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci in the early seventeenth century. Later a British missionary translated it from Italian into Latin and added material concerning the history of missionary work as well as of Matteo Ricci. One passage in the book reads as follows:

In answering what the main content of Christianity is, Dr. Xu Guangqi [one of Ricci’s converts] sums it up very exactly in four Chinese characters: “expelling Buddhism and complementing Confucianism” (去佛补儒 qù fó bǔ rú). That is to say, he wants to expel the idol of Buddhism and add something to the doctrines of Confucianism.


Christianity as both a continuation and a restoration of Chinese traditional thought and offered a way to integrate Chinese Confucian learning into Catholicism. He was, however, highly critical of contemporary neo-Confucian thought and Chinese Buddhism. Ricci believed in gradual change. Examination of the ritual practices surrounding the commemoration of personal ancestors and of China’s philosopher Confucius convinced Ricci that converts could participate in such ritual practices with slight modifications. Wherever he stayed he won converts from all social classes, starting Catholic congregations in cities such as Zhaoqing, Nanchang, and Nanjing.

Ricci’s claims of an early Chinese monotheism and his tolerance toward Chinese ancestral rites have been disputed to this day and fueled the Rites Controversy. While Ricci and many Jesuits considered the ancestral rites to be civic, representatives of the mendicant orders, Benedictines, and Franciscans saw them as religious and therefore incompatible with Catholic practices. But Ricci’s integrative approach led to the baptism of several important scholar-officials whose patronage allowed Ricci, Chinese Christians from all social classes, and future Catholic missionaries—even those from mendicant orders highly critical of Jesuit missionary techniques—to evangelize and weather the storms of repeated persecutions in relative safety.

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Further Reading


