

FRANCESCO GUARDIANI

The West Shall Shake the East Awake

MATTEO RICCI (1552-1610)

A JESUIT IN CHINA

ABSTRACT. The first Westerner to set foot in mainland China with the declared intention to change its millenary culture was a man of faith, not only a Christian faith, but a faith in the egalitarian, democratic principles of modernity, inspired by the Gutenberg revolution. The rather cryptic, prophetic quote from Joyce (*Finnegans Wake*, 473) appears well apt to describe the epic adventure of Matteo Ricci in China as the very beginning of a process of cultural globalization in which we are still immersed today.

Behind every paper there is a story, and this paper is no exception. However, it is exceptional and no doubt surprising for the colleagues who know me, and know of my interest in Petrarch, the Baroque, and love poetry in general, that I should become interested in the works of a Jesuit priest, a missionary who arrived in China in 1583 and died there twenty-eight years later. This paper should clarify the whys and hows of this interest of mine, but its main purpose here is a personal challenge. Will I be able to communicate the admiration that I have for Matteo Ricci and his works? Will I be able to show how profoundly inspiring his life and writings can still be today for the great humanistic and humanitarian generosity of his mind and soul? This is the challenge that I have in front of me today.

Let me say, at the outset, that after reading just a few passages of Ricci's *Commentaries* and a few of his wonderful *Letters*, I was struck by the strong impression that he deserves to be acclaimed among the greatest writers and philosophers of his time. The end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries were turbulent times – times of accelerated cultural transformation all over Europe – times that were shared by Shakespeare and Francis Bacon in England, Campanella, Bruno, and Galileo in Italy, Cervantes, Lope de Vega, and Góngora in Spain – in short, by the founding fathers of what we have come to call Modernity.

Matteo Ricci was born in 1552 in Macerata, in central Italy, and died in 1610 in Beijing, China. He is not usually found in annals of Italian literature, not even among the numerous “minor authors” of his time. The simple but problematic reason for his absence is in his being a Jesuit. He belonged to the religious world that, in the cultural historiography of an openly anti-clerical modern Italy (i.e. after the unification of 1861), was considered anti-Italian, anti-patriotic. This historiographic perspective has been variously criticized and modified, and certainly with the figure of Matteo Ricci, something more could be done to this effect. My intention, however, is not to focus on the poor critical fortune of this writer or his absence from the canon of Italian literature, but rather on the exceptional dimension of his cultural adventure which allows us to place him among the most innovative thinkers of his time.

In order to introduce the works of Matteo Ricci, a word must be spent on how they got to us. It is an interesting story, and there is no need for a philological analysis to appreciate it. Ricci wrote his major work, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e del Cristianesimo in Cina*, between 1609 and 1610. The title literally means, “On the Entry of the Society of Jesus and of Christendom in China,” but this work is more commonly known as the *Commentaries on China*. Ricci died in Beijing at the age of fifty-eight, just when he was about to complete the work in Italian. The *Commentaries* constitute a comprehensive synthesis of all of Ricci’s previous works, of various kinds (religious, philosophical, and scientific treatises, letters and reports) and in various languages (Italian, Chinese, Portuguese, and Spanish). Because of this comprehensiveness that is proportionate to its voluminous size, the *Commentaries* are considered Ricci’s major work, and a truly monumental masterpiece.

With the death of the author, the Italian manuscript fell into the hands of Father Nicolas Trigault, a Belgian Jesuit and historian. Trigault translated it into Latin with a few touch-ups and some addenda, publishing the volume with a frontispiece and an introduction indicating that the work, though based on Ricci’s diaries, was in fact his own. This piece of pious collaboration was published five years after Ricci’s death with a new title – *De christiana expeditione apud Sinas [The Christian Expedition to China]* – and was enormously successful. It was translated into many languages, including Italian (by Antonio Sozzini da Sarzana in 1622, who didn’t even make the attempt to check the original “diaries” by Ricci). Ricci remained in the background of Trigault’s book for centuries. It was, in fact, only in 1911 that another Jesuit, Father Pietro Tacchi-Venturi, found and published the original manuscript with the title *Historical*

Works of Father Matteo Ricci. But for a truly reliable and well-restored text, we have to wait for another Jesuit and a scholar in the Chinese language, Father Pasquale D'Elia, whose superb critical edition of Ricci's work was published in several volumes from 1942 to 1949. All new editions of Ricci's works, including the latest from Quodlibet in 2001, depend on D'Elia's text.

Trigault, Tacchi-Venturi, and D'Elia were all Jesuits, which simply means that Ricci's critical fortune has remained within the confines of his Order. Recently, thanks to the interest of the Bishop of Macerata, the process of the beatification of Matteo Ricci was initiated, and it is very possible that, with the favour of the present Pope, he might soon be venerated as a saint. Now, I believe that together with the religious merits of this remarkable man, we should also give relevance to his civic virtues. As an Italianist and a historian of culture, I feel compelled to speak of Ricci's spectacular cultural openness, his egalitarian perception of all mankind, his active apostolate, and his lack of even the slightest expectation of ecclesiastical advancement or temporal fame for the investment of his entire life as a teacher of science and Christian doctrine.

But before continuing with other comments, let me give you some information on Ricci's formative years. He remained in his native city until the age of sixteen, studying in the newest school of the new order of the Jesuits. Among his teachers and friends were Alessandro Valignani, Roberto Bellarmino, and Rodolfo Acquaviva, all of whom had a major influence on his life (as I will clarify further). Inspired by them, he entered the novitiate of the Jesuits in Rome where, at the Collegio Romano (the Jesuit university), he studied with Father Christopher Clavius. He remained in Rome until the age of twenty-five, when he was called to the Asian missions. Ricci rushed to the Portuguese city of Lisbon without even stopping to see his family. He didn't want to miss a moment of his missionary life which, he soon learned, necessitated a great deal of patience and plain hard work. To begin, he had to learn Portuguese, the official language of the Portuguese ports of Goa and Macau, where Jesuits had established their first missions. In Goa and Cochín (in India), the young novice taught in a seminary for natives. He was finally ordained a priest and destined to China by the Father Superior of all Asian missions, the so-called *Padre Visitatore*, Alessandro Valignani. Father Valignani was an immensely talented man who understood that to enter China – an accomplishment that had been denied to St. Francis Xavier – one had to learn the culture and acquire the language of the Chinese. And that is exactly what he ordered Matteo Ricci

to do. The young priest, who had been waiting for just such an opportunity, immersed himself in the culture of the Chinese and was able to master the language in a relatively short period.

Ricci entered mainland China in 1583, a date that four hundred years afterwards would be celebrated by the People's Republic of China by the issuing of an official commemorative stamp and the restoration of Ricci's tomb in Beijing (which had been vandalized by the nationalistic excesses of the Red Guards). Why were the Chinese so appreciative of the memory of Matteo Ricci, although realistically, nothing was left of his religious apostolate there? Perhaps a simple list of his non-religious works in Chinese – works that have been continually in print from the sixteenth-century to today – would suggest an answer:

- 1584 – *Geographic Map of the Mountains and of the Seas*
- 1600 – *Essay on the Four Elements* [there were five for the Chinese]
- 1601 – *Treatise on the Constellations*
- 1601 – *The Mysterious Visual Map of the Entire World*
- 1603 – *Mappamondo, or, World Atlas*
- 1601 and 1607 – *Lunar and Solar Discs*
- 1607 – *Astronomical Sphere with Figures and Comments*
- 1607 – *Elements of Geometry* [a Chinese translation of the first six books of Euclid]
- 1608 – *Eight Songs for Western Harpsichord*
- 1609 – *Treatise of Iso-Perimetric Figures*
- Posthumous – *Treatise of Arithmetic*
- Posthumous – *Theory and Method of Measurement*
- Posthumous – *Western Art of Memory*

(from “Bibliografia ricciana,” in Ricci, *Della entrata...*, pp. xli-xlii)

Many ideas come to mind just from reading these titles. First of all, they constitute a complex of works reflecting perfectly the didactic *cursus* of the *Quadrivium*, the four traditional scientific disciplines of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. Ricci obviously felt the pressure and responsibility of scientific teaching, and he performed using the most organized and systematic *curriculum studiorum* he knew.

Some may ask, “but who published all these works for Ricci in China, in several successful and successive editions?” In the fourth chapter of the first book of his *Commentaries*, entitled, “Of the Mechanical Arts of This Land,” Ricci spoke of the printing press in China. One could write an entire essay on this description, not for its extension, but for the symbolic and practical value that this art had for Ricci in China. In brief, he indicated that although the Chinese had invented the printing press five hundred years before, they did not use it to its full potential as a European like himself could do only one hundred and fifty years after Gutenberg. Ricci assumed this medium of communication with enthusiasm, energy, and a civic faith in its positive emancipating effects. Ricci’s first books in Chinese were done in his own house with the help of servants who, with sharp chisels, engraved the wood to create the matrix for the printed sheet. The Chinese ideograms allow the use of wood rather than lead, Ricci explained, which greatly simplified the work of the printing shop.

Coming now to the central part of my discussion, I would like to focus on the generosity with which Ricci gratified his attentive audience teaching astronomy, geometry, trigonometry, and so on; a generosity which appears excessive if one accepts the common opinion of the Jesuit critics that have dealt with Ricci’s works. For them, Ricci’s scientific teaching was some sort of trick devised to appeal to the curiosity of the Chinese intellectuals and then convert them to Christianity. We must stress the fact that Ricci’s conversions were not over-abundant in number – only two thousand, a good number but disappointing for someone who had entered China with the intent of converting the entire empire of millions. What, then, motivated this person and gave him strength to continue his difficult apostolate in a distant country? Fillipo Mignini, introducing Ricci’s *Letters*, gives us a list of the primary elements of his motivation:

The love of God, Father of all men . . . the desire to transmit the revealed truth . . . the Jesuit legendary obedience . . . the desire of martyrdom . . . all of these explain, in part, the human experience of Matteo Ricci.

(Mignini, in Ricci’s *Lettere*, p.xiii. Translation mine, here and below)

The list is obviously insufficient if Mignini himself continues:

There were two other factors in Ricci’s experience: a natural inclination of his character to people of foreign culture, and an authentic feeling of equality, a perception of the very equal dignity of every human being. (*Ibid.* p.xii)

This is where I wanted to arrive, to focus on Ricci's religious virtues as civic virtues, soon to become a mental state, a basic condition of the modern, emancipated, democratic societies. Matteo Ricci was a man of great faith. As the first Westerner to set foot in continental China with the intent of changing its culture, he was not only a man blessed with Christian faith, but also a visionary armed with the egalitarian principles inspired by the Gutenberg Revolution, of which the Jesuits were principal supporters and promoters.

The Jesuits were a relatively new ecclesiastical order at the time of Matteo Ricci. Their founder, Ignatius of Loyola (1491 – 1556) was still alive when Ricci was born. Actually, observing with a bit of attention the dates of the important events of the time, we notice that the year in which Ricci was born – 1552 – was the same as that of Francis Xavier's death. Xavier was, of course, the trusted friend of Ignatius and the first Jesuit missionary in Asia. He desperately tried to enter China, but that was continually denied to him, and he died right at the port of entry of the most populous country on earth, the country with more souls to save than any other. The dream of converting it was passed to Matteo Ricci. And so when Ricci, at the end of his life, wrote the *Commentaries*, or rather, *On the Entry of the Society of Jesus and of Christendom in China*, he was in fact celebrating the triumph of the Society, an event that associated him directly with Francis Xavier and Ignatius. That was the celebration of a triumph of an ideal and of a method, a Christian conversion of the world with a common respect for the different local cultures.

To this extraordinary Christian faith, as I was saying, a civic faith corresponded on the equal dignity of all mankind. The strength of this belief in Ricci is illustrated by a particular episode in his life in Goa, on the Indian subcontinent, where he spent some years teaching in a Jesuit seminary for natives. In this seminary, some faculty members (including the Father Superior) refused to teach philosophy and theology to native students, claiming that if they mastered these disciplines, the Indians would become as knowledgeable as the Europeans, and this would make them arrogant. Ricci saw a great contradiction in this blatant example of colonial anxiety; the gift of culture and emancipation was being blocked by an action that denied culture and emancipation, to say nothing of brotherhood. So he wrote to the General of the Order, Father Claudio Acquaviva, who was uncle to one of Ricci's greatest influences. Rodolfo Acquaviva (1550 – 1585) was a fellow Jesuit and Asian missionary of Ricci's own age who found martyrdom in Persia. Ricci, in his letter to Rodolfo's uncle, made his point with the eloquence of a great advocate

of human right. I'll skip the text of the letter here, because it is very long, but I would like to translate the last few lines. Ricci wrote:

I realized that I might have gone overboard with my limited judgement, young age [he was twenty-nine], and lack of experience..., but I am sure you will understand me in the right way. (*Lettere* p. 29-30)

I am focusing now on the closing of the letter, which is not rhetorical at all, since Ricci knew that Claudio Acquaviva would understand him “in the right way.” The Acquavivas were from Atri, a municipality in Abruzzo, in central Italy, not far from Ricci’s hometown of Macerata, which is in the bordering region of Marche. There was an extraordinary “modern” understanding between Ricci and Acquaviva, which was strengthened by their common provincial and aristocratic background from the same area in Italy.

It should not be forgotten, in the same context, the common background of Alessandro Valignani of Chieti, also in Abruzzo; he was the Jesuit superior of all Asian missions, who sent Ricci to China together with Father Michele Ruggieri (1543 – 1607). Valignani was the first to understand the necessity of a perfect knowledge of the Chinese language and culture for all missionaries to Asia, as it has already been said, so he freed Ricci and Ruggieri of any other commitments for two years in order for the two to study and prepare themselves to enter the continent. Ruggieri eventually returned to Italy and died in Salerno, but the return was denied to Ricci (who never requested it), by the emperor Wanli and his ministers, because they believed that a man of Ricci’s intelligence must have learned so much of China that he could, if he turned against them, prove a great danger to the Empire. Ricci knew that he would die in China. With the occasional sense of melancholy, his letters are nevertheless replenished with a sense of euphoria, of training for the great moment – the conversion of the Emperor. This is never explicitly stated in the letters, but the hope of it is very clear, and with it, of the reversal of the coolness, indifference, and even hostility demonstrated by the Chinese to the idea of conversion. The break that Ricci pursued at all levels of Chinese hierarchy, leading to the chief mandarins and to the emperor himself, would never take place, and yet, when Ricci was finally received by the Emperor, he had, for a moment, the illusion of the greatest of all conquests. In fact, he was never received personally by Wanli – only by an empty throne, a feature of Imperial etiquette. The Emperor, however, was so curious regarding Ricci that he ordered a full-figure painting of the missionary in order to see him.

Ricci's trust in the administrative and political hierarchy of China, his open dialogue with the Imperial astronomers and scientists, were not a result of Ricci's personal attitude, but rather of a well-planned strategy of conversion; namely, to deal with the heads of governments instead of the poor and disadvantaged – working from the top down. The first Jesuit missionaries in Japan, including Ricci's mentor Alessandro Valignani, had encountered this objection from the “wise men” of the land: “All our beliefs and our ancient traditions derive from China. When China becomes Christian, so will Japan.” The entering of China, therefore, was particularly significant to the conversion of Asia as a whole. This is why Francis Xavier interrupted his work in Japan and tried to enter China. If China is the head of Asia, the Emperor is the head of China, and Ricci aimed to convert him from the moment of his entrance into the country.

Ricci classified the existing religious “sects” of his China into two groups: Buddhism/Taoism and Confucianism. He accepted the latter as a possible basis for Christianity, but rejected the first. The difficulty with Buddhism, he clarified, is the absence of a transcendental entity identifiable as a “person.” According to Ricci, there is no personal God and no personal spiritual link with mankind in Buddhism. In contrast, he found Confucianism to be more of a tradition than a religion, based on the cult of ancestor worship. The figure of Christ and the teaching of the Gospels could be integrated with Confucianism without drastic contrasts or contradictions. This very modern position – so modern that it has been inserted in the Directive for Missions of the Second Vatican Council – created quite a controversy after Ricci's death, and contributed to the isolation of the Jesuit missionaries. Father Niccolò Longobardo (1565 – 1655), Ricci's successor as superior of the missions in China, did not have his vision or faith, and was uncomfortable accepting Confucian beliefs in the Christian doctrine. Without the protection of the Jesuits, and with the Franciscans and the Dominicans pressing for an official Church position equating Confucianism with paganism, Ricci's position was rejected with an official decree of Pope Urban VIII. The most enlightened among the Jesuits reacted by launching “an investigation into the true tenets of Confucianism,” led by the brilliant Father Martino Martini, who finally obtained a reversal of the papal decree. But this is a story for another paper, and we have to leave it at that. I will only say that, after Ricci's death, and with the controversy going on, there were only few Chinese conversions. Other events made the situation even worse, among them the death of the emperor Wanli, and soon after, the

end of the Ming dynasty. The new expressions of nationalism that followed multiplied the difficulties for Jesuits in Asia, who nevertheless remained the only teachers and mediators of Western culture in China until the order was abolished in 1773.

If the religious apostolate of Ricci did not satisfy all expectations, his scientific apostolate produced extraordinary fruits for the Chinese culture. Ricci has become part of China's cultural history, and today his books are still reprinted there. In certain aspects, he was a startlingly modern writer. In a new detailed list of all elements of modernity present in his *Commentaries*, the most important that I have found are clocks, calendars, spiritual exercises, geographical maps, the glass prisms of Venice, the printing press, and the ladder of Roberto Bellarmino.

Clocks and the measure of time, calendars, and astronomy were real obsessions of the cultured Chinese. Ricci, who had studied at the Collegio Romano under Christopher Clavius (who had been recruited by Pope Gregory XII for the reform of the calendar), could certainly satisfy their intellectual curiosity. He built solar, water, and mechanical clocks, he corrected the lunar calendar of the Chinese to the more precise Gregorian, and was able to forecast lunar eclipses with a precision that astounded the imperial astronomers. He also created the first maps of China and a large world atlas, or *Mappamondo*, that became the most desired Western artefact of the intellectual Chinese.

Ricci's culture was systematic, based on analytical notions kept together in a linear chain of cause and effect with an inductive logic that constitutes the foundation of the modern age. He was not affected by the controversies that poisoned the Italian academia a few years after his death. In his time, the Jesuits were the *avant-garde*, the true protagonists in the pursuit of modern science. They did not (yet) have positions to be defended. Father Roberto Bellarmino was another Jesuit (later canonized as a saint) that Ricci must have met in his early years. Bellarmino's treatise *La scala per salire con la mente a Dio* (*The Ladder with Which to Ascend with the Mind to God*) is, in essence, a series of spiritual exercises combining theology and science without contrasts. It is a beautiful example of the Jesuits' approach to modernity: dividing knowledge into small particles, to be studied individually and systematically. Note that the division of light that appears from exposing the glass prisms of Venice to the sun was something enchanting to the Chinese. In the fascination that Ricci's audience felt for this modest toy of Western ingenuity, one can perhaps see a more complex admiration for a form of knowledge that gives relevance to an analytical perception of reality, one divided into its atomic

components, each studied separately. Using the prisms of Venice as a metaphor for this kind of perception, we can see that each coloured ray of light corresponds to a step in the ladder of Bellarmino, or a unit to be remembered in the vast *Palace of Memory* that Matteo Ricci introduced to the Chinese, or a minimum square of his world atlas, drawn by meridians and parallels, or a fixed thought of a mental exercise extracted from the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, or one small lead character representing the printing press of the Western world.

These are also the signs and the symbols of modernity that captured the curiosity of the Asian minds of which Ricci became the generous teacher. This is how the treatises of arithmetic and geometry were born, and this is the key to the *Mysterious Map of the Entire World* or of the *Treatise on Theory and Method of Measurements*. There is a euphoric spirit in the Chinese lessons of Ricci that is born out of his Christian feeling of being in the right. It is a moment in which militant Christianity and scientific *avant-garde* are perfectly combined to become, in the apostolate of this missionary, one and the same. It is a moment of profound faith, which opened the road to an effective emancipation of human consciousness by means of love – fraternal love.

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