

## BECOMING CHINESE WITH THE CHINESE: THE MISSIONARY CONTRIBUTION OF MATTEO RICCI

JAROSŁAW DURAJ, S.J.

Faculty of Religious Studies and Philosophy,  
The University of Saint Joseph, Macau, S.A.R. China.  
Email: jaroslaw.duraj@usj.edu.mo

**Abstract:** Matteo Ricci is one of the most important Christian missionaries in China whose groundbreaking method of accommodation in the context of the Chinese culture was paradigmatic and influenced the history of relationship between China and the West. Ricci's work had a profound impact on Chinese culture. He introduced new ideas in astronomy, mathematics, cartography, and other fields. He also helped to spread Christianity in China through the means of science and dialogue built on authentic friendship. In this article we offer a discussion about his missionary work that left mark on the history of evangelization of China by considering his scientific contribution, his missionary spirituality and accommodation method resulting in his personal experience of intercultural encounter leading to his profound self-transformation. As the Catholic church already officially recognized his "heroic virtues" putting Matteo Ricci on the path to sainthood, it is important to reflect about contribution of this great Jesuit to the dialogue between China and the West.

**Keywords:** Matteo Ricci, China, Spirituality, Accommodation, Mission, Dialogue

**Abstrak:** Matteo Ricci adalah salah seorang misionaris Kristen terpenting di Tiongkok, karena membuat terobosan berupa metode akomodasi yang akan menjadi paradigma kultural yang memengaruhi sejarah relasi antara Tiongkok dan Barat. Pengaruh Ricci terhadap kebudayaan Tiongkok sangat dalam karena ia memperkenalkan astronomi, matematika, kartografi, dan bidang ilmu lainnya. Ia membantu penyebaran Kristianitas di Tiongkok lewat jalan ilmu pengetahuan serta lewat di-

alog berdasarkan persahabatan tulus. Artikel ini mendiskusikan karya Ricci yang menandai sejarah evangelisasi di Tiongkok dengan menyoroti kontribusinya dalam bidang sains dan dengan menelisik metode akomodasi beserta spiritualitas penginjilannya yang berakar pada perjumpaan interkultural yang membuahkan transformasi mendalam dalam kehidupan pribadinya. Mengingat Gereja Katolik telah secara resmi mengakui keutamaan-keutamaan heroik Matteo Ricci serta telah memulai proses kanonisasinya, penting kiranya merefleksikan kontribusi misionaris Yesuit ini dalam hal dialog antara Tiongkok dan Barat.

**Kata-kata Kunci:** Matteo Ricci, Tiongkok, spiritualitas, akomodasi, misi, dialog

## INTRODUCTION

Francis Xavier, the patron of the catholic missions dreamed of entering great China, because he learned in Japan that in order to succeed in proclaiming the Gospel in that country, he first had to convert the Chinese to Catholicism, since the Japanese accepted all that was esteemed by the Chinese Empire. He couldn't realize his dreams because in 1552, when he was at the door of China on the Shangchuan island (上川島 also known as Sancian or "St. John's Island"), near Macau, he was passing away from this world due to exhaustion. Yet, he left his testament, spiritual instructions for the other Jesuits to continue what he had started by the grace of God. In the same year of the death of Francis Xavier, Matteo Ricci was born in Italy - the future greatest missionary in China who fulfilled the dream of Saint Francis and in some sense re-opened the door of China for the Christianity and the western world. On his deathbed Ricci left the testament by saying: "I am leaving you on the threshold of an open door, that leads to a great reward, but only after labors endured and dangers encountered."<sup>1</sup>

On 17th December 2022 Pope Francis authorized the decree that recognizes the "heroic virtues" of Matteo Ricci. He is now officially called

---

1 Matteo Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matteo Ricci 1583-1610*, translated from the Latin by Louis J. Gallagher, S.J., with a Foreword by Richard J. Cushing, D.D., LL.D. (New York: Random House, 1953), p. 563.

“venerable” and recognized as such by the Church for his testimony of faith. Matteo Ricci is one of the main protagonists in the history of Christian missions who contributed significantly to the encounter between different cultures. Ricci together with Marco Polo are the only two non-Chinese represented in the Chinese history Millennium Monument in Beijing. Ricci was the first non-Chinese to receive the honour of being buried in the Beijing capital. This article presents the portrayal of such an exceptional missionary protagonist in China with the focus on his paradigmatic missionary spirituality and accommodation method with its consequences for intercultural dialogue between China and the West. Even though Matteo Ricci was a man of his time, his innovative approach to missionary inculturation, his promotion of religious values through scientific as well as cultural dialogical exchange earned him a title of the “father of Christianity in China” as well as the “father of Western Sinology.”

### **“A WISE MAN FROM THE WEST”**

Matteo Ricci was born on the 6th of October 1552, and died on 11th of May 1610. He came from Macerata from a noble Italian family. Early on he wanted to enter the Jesuit order but knew that his father would not agree, so at the age of 16 he started studying law in Rome, but soon became more interested in the new science that was sweeping European culture. First, he studied mathematics and astronomy and then petitioned to join the Jesuit order. During his studies he had heard about China mainly through the written relations of Marco Polo. Then he was sent to a Jesuit mission in the Far East. In Lisbon where he waited for the ship going to Asia, he continued his studies. When he came to India he did his theological studies, prepared himself for the priesthood and was ordained. Then he was appointed to go to Macao and to China, where he was assigned the difficult task of organizing a mission. In Macao Ricci studied the Chinese language and culture very intensely, and achieved such proficiency that later in China he persuaded officials to allow him to enter the country. There he had the opportunity to talk to mandarins and intellectuals about philosophy and religion. He also taught Chinese

intellectuals about mathematics or European science and published the first six books of Euclid's *Elements* in Chinese with the help of his first convert. Ricci, after twenty-one long years of avid and intense study of the Chinese language, history and culture, finally succeeded in entering the closed to foreigners Beijing capital on the 24th of January 1601. He remained there for the rest of his life teaching science, mathematics, and Christianity to Chinese intellectuals.

In China, he presented himself as "a monk from the West," took the Chinese name as Li Madou 利瑪竇, and acquired a nickname of "the Sage from the West" given to him by the intellectual elites of China. Initially, Ricci dressed himself as the Buddhist monk in order to be accepted in China and to show that his intentions to work are purely religious ones. This is why he was received and treated as Buddhist bonze. Nevertheless, Ricci slowly became familiar with Chinese culture and eventually decided to wear Confucian garments, portraying himself as a Jesuit-mandarin.

Ricci's attempt to appear as religious person in Buddhist dress failed because he realized that the Buddhists did not have good reputation among the educated people. His western intellectual formation did not help him to face the challenge and understand the authentic teaching and the way of Chan Buddhism. Nevertheless, his scholastic formation prepared him to enter into dialogue with the religious background of ancient China. He made an attempt at convincing his Chinese counterparts that Christianity was basically quite well attuned with those ancient Chinese religions. Hence, he wanted to demonstrate how in ancient China there was belief and terminology for a personal view of God. So, to some extent Ricci was showing that he is not bringing a new religion, but something that was already present in ancient China inviting them to go back and consider these ancient religious traditions. He blamed Neo-Confucianists for distorting this ancient belief in a personal God.<sup>2</sup>

---

2 Cf. Yves Raguin, *Ways of Contemplation East and West: Part One to Four* (Taipei, Taiwan: Ricci Institute for Chinese Studies, 1993-2001), Part IV, pp. 326-327.

Ricci understood that in order to work in China he had to change his social status from a monk to a mandarin, and in that way, he could have a contact with *literati* or a higher-class officials and intellectuals. He wanted to show and improve harmony between Christianity and Confucianism, excluding Buddhism and Taoism, which appeared to him corrupted and representing doctrines completely in opposition to Christianity.

Today, from our contemporary knowledge and perspective we understand better that a form of Buddhism Ricci came to know in his time did not give him a chance of an objective assessment of this tradition and hence he had rather limited understanding of Buddhism. This partly was due to biased assessment of this religion spread by the Jesuit missionaries in Japan who concluded that Buddhists were idolaters or just atheists. Consequently, "having rejected any association with Buddhism, and probably following his Confucian interlocutors, Ricci developed a very harsh attitude towards Buddhist monks, as well as Taoist priests."<sup>3</sup>

Matteo Ricci was striving to accommodate Christianity into the Chinese context. He appreciated very much the Chinese culture and had the idea of joining the ranks of Confucian scholars. His broad knowledge in fields of cartography, geography, mathematics, music, art and other disciplines made a deep impression on Chinese. He had an extraordinary gift of memory thanks to which he could remember long passages in Chinese and recite them correctly thanks to mnemotechnic ability.<sup>4</sup> From the historical perspective Joseph Needham acknowledges the genius of Ricci by stating succinctly that "Matteo Ricci was one of the most remarkable and brilliant men in history (...) not only an extraordinary linguist, mastering the Chinese language to perfection, but also a scientist and mathematician of eminence."<sup>5</sup>

---

3 Thierry Meynard, "The Venerable Matteo Ricci," *The Journal of the Macau Ricci Institute* vol. 11 (March) 2023, p. 96.

4 See Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (London-Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988).

5 Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1954), pp. 148-149.

These are the reasons why Ricci earned the admiration of Chinese intelligentsia, Chinese officials or influential personalities who eventually helped in his effort to secure the permanent base in the capital and in finding the possibility of exercising his scientific work, evangelization activities and building up friendly relationships with Chinese. His friendship and scientific expertise led some important Chinese personalities to embrace the Christianity. Among the first converts were Paul Xu Guangqi 徐光啓, Leo Li Zhizao 李之藻 and Michael Yang Tingyun 楊廷筠.

Thanks to the marvelous work of evangelization in modern China, Christianity took root and Christian communities founded by Ricci continued to follow his lead. The Christian religion became, after Buddhism, the most diffused imported religion, so Ricci can be called "the father of Christianity in China."

### **RICCI'S MISSIONARY SPIRITUALITY**

The apostolic vision of the missionary activity of Matteo Ricci was multilateral. We can distinguish three aspects of the apostolate of Ricci in China which show us the spiritual dimensions of his apostolic and missionary work.

1) Matteo Ricci understood that firstly he had to study the Chinese language in order to have a possibility of speaking about Christianity and to start the intercultural dialogue with the old Chinese civilization. He was the first to give a basic knowledge of the Catechism and fundamental principles of the Christian doctrine to high officials in the Chinese court, to mandarins and later to ordinary people. Thanks to his efforts Christians in China had their first Catechism and through it the whole organic doctrine of the faith. For him the Catechism and other books were an important tool in the process of evangelization of China.<sup>6</sup> He collaborat-

---

6 "(...) i libri arrivavano dove i padri non potevano, e le nostre cose assai meglio si dichiarano con lettere in questo regno che con parole, per il grande vigore che le loro lettere tengono," Matteo Ricci, *Opere storiche del P. Matteo Ricci S.I.* (Macerata: Primiato Stabilimento Tipografico, 1911-1913), vol. I, p. 134.

ed with another Italian Jesuit Michele Ruggieri<sup>7</sup> on the translation of the *Ten Commandments* in Chinese. In his great work *T'ien-chu Shih-i* 天主實義 (*The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*)<sup>8</sup> he presents the principles of Catholic teaching on salvation in a form of dialogue between Western and Chinese scholar.

2) The second dimension lies in his method of apostleship. Thanks to his sensitivity, Matteo Ricci pioneered the method of accommodation in China, succeeded in helping the spirit of Christianity to enter the Chinese context and to adapt itself to oriental qualities and conditions. In this process of uniting himself with the local culture Ricci did not want to lose any of the fundamental principles of the Catholic faith. The fundamental step necessary to start the work of accommodation and evangelisation was to speak Chinese. He knew that the Chinese would not learn Latin in order to become Christians. The first step belonged to him – he had to study and to speak Chinese very well. It was not only the matter of language, but especially the requirement of a perfect education in Chinese culture, literature and philosophy. He had to become – like the mandarins or *literati* – a very well-educated man, scholar-gentlemen or scholar-bureaucrat (*shi dafu* 士大夫). In the instruction sent to the superiors in Rome for those who were going to go to the Chinese mission he wrote about the necessity of studying the language as an indispensable tool for evangelisation of China.<sup>9</sup> When he asked for someone to be sent to China, he insisted on sending the men not only “good, but also men of talent, since we are dealing with a people both intelligent and learned.”<sup>10</sup>

7 Ruggieri's Chinese name was Luo Mingjian 羅明堅. He stayed in China between 1580 and 1608 and is considered a founding father of the Jesuit China missions. He also co-authored with Ricci the first European-Chinese dictionary, and as the first European he translated the Four Books of Confucianism, so he can be considered one of the first European sinologists.

8 Matteo Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (T'ien-chu Shih-i)*, ed. Edward J. Malatesta, S.J. (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985).

9 “I recommend to all our fathers that they devote themselves to the study of Chinese letters as to an affair upon which depends in large measure the conversion of China.” Ricci, *Opere storiche*, vol. II, p. 257, quoted by George H. Dunne, *Generation of Giants* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962), p. 94.

10 Ricci, *Opere storiche*, vol. II, 390, quoted by Dunne, *Generation of Giants*, p. 105.

His apostolic spirituality expressed itself in the appreciation of the Chinese culture and popular traditions, as well as in his great respect for the Chinese people. Admiring Chinese philosophy and Chinese classics he was able to say that they “seem to be quite the equals of our own most distinguished philosophers.”<sup>11</sup> Making an overall and generous evaluation of the Chinese classics Ricci concluded that

[The ancient Chinese] always took great care to follow in all they did the dictates of reason which they said they had received from Heaven, and they never believed of the King of heaven and other spirits, his ministers, things as indecent as our Romans, the Greeks, the Egyptians and other foreign nations believed. Whence we can hope of the immense goodness of the Lord, that many of these ancients were saved in the natural law, with the special help that only God grants to those who do on their part as much as they can to receive it (...). This can also be derived from many beautiful books that remain to this day, of these their ancient philosophers, full of great piety and good advice for human living and acquiring virtues, in no way inferior to the most famous of our ancient philosophers.<sup>12</sup>

After a long study of Chinese religions, he understood that they are very different from Catholicism, especially Buddhism and Taoism. Yet, regarding Confucianism, he discovered its similarity to Christianity especially in its ethical system and theistic concepts of creation as well as personal notion of God. He learned that Confucianists have two names for addressing the “Creator” i.e. *Tianzhu* 天主 (The Lord of Heaven) and *Shangdi* 上帝 (The Lord-on-High). The use of these two terms created some controversy because originally, they were associated with Taoism and Buddhism usage as well.<sup>13</sup> As regards the genesis and usage of the

11 Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matteo Ricci 1583-1610*, p. 93.

12 Matteo Ricci, *Fonti Ricciane: documenti originali concernenti Matteo Ricci e la storia delle prime relazioni tra l'Europa e la Cina (1579-1615)*, ed. Pasquale M. P. D'Elia, S.J. (Roma: La Libreria dello Stato, 1942-1949), N170, vol. 1, pp. 109-10, quoted by Paul A. Rule, “What Were ‘The directives of Matteo Ricci’ Regarding the Chinese Rites?,” *Pacific Rim Report* no. 54 (May 2010), p. 6.

13 “There were complications for using both terms. *Shang-ti* was adopted by Taoism, which both Ricci and the Confucians spoke strongly against; and *T'ien* fell short of adequately expressing the Christian God. The term decided upon was *T'ien-chu*, which translated means ‘Lord of Heaven.’ Though a term that refers to a deity in Buddhist

### Chinese terms for God, according to Thierry Meynard

Ricci's acceptance of *Shangdi* was based on his close study of Chinese texts and his consequent understanding of them. It was not a resigned concession to the local culture. Nor was it a strategy for manipulating the Chinese language from within, twisting the original meaning into something completely different and colonising China, not through military weapons, but through ideological tools.<sup>14</sup>

Some missionaries did not follow the use of this theological terminology as they preferred the Latin term for God. The whole issue of naming God in Chinese as well as the veneration of ancestors practiced by Chinese Catholics became a thorny issue especially after the death of Ricci and generated debates and disagreements leading to the Chinese Rites controversy *Zhongguo Liyi Zhi Zheng* 中國禮儀之爭) during the 17th and 18th centuries.<sup>15</sup>

Besides the appreciation of the virtues and rendering veneration in terms of paying homage to the ancestors, he saw that the Chinese were people with a very deep sense of ethical values as taught by great ancestors of their Chinese civilization such as Confucius. Ricci even stated that Confucius, as shown by his sayings and by his good life "is not any less than our ancient philosophers, and even better than some of them."<sup>16</sup> Therefore, he later allowed Christians to practice rites to honour their ancestors and also to honour Confucius, by which he helped Christianity to

---

writings, the missionaries adopted this term freely and it remains the official term for God in the Catholic Church in China today. In his writings, however, Ricci often used both of the traditional Chinese terms for God, as well as the new *T'ien-chu*." Joel Casady, "Matteo Ricci and His Process of Evangelization," *Obsculta* Vol. 3, no. 1 (2010), p. 7.

14 Meynard, "The Venerable Matteo Ricci," p. 90.

15 Thierry Meynard, *Matteo Ricci. À la découverte du Christ chinois*, Collection Sur la route des saints (Bruxelles: Fidélité – Éditions jésuites, 2022), pp. 83-88. For more complete study on the controversy see David E. Mungello, ed., *The Chinese rites controversy. It's history and meaning*, Monumenta Serica T. XXXIII (Nettetal-Sankt Augustin: Steyler Verlag, 1994); George Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy* (Chicago: Loyola University Press), 1985.

16 Matteo Ricci, *Dalla entrata della Compagnia di Gesù e Christianità nella Cina*, 3 edizione, eds. Piero Corradini, Maddalena del Gatto (Macerata: Quaderni Quodlibet, 2010), p. 29.

spread little by little in China. Regarding this delicate issue of ancestor worship toward which Ricci was in favour, Paul Rule argues:

Ricci believed that Chinese Catholics could be trusted to have correct intentions in performing such rituals – intentions of veneration, reverence and emulation, not worship, as of exemplary human beings, not gods – and intentions were what determined the morality of an act. Furthermore, the non-Christian educated elite were regarded by Ricci as holding materialistic and even atheistic views which made them less, not more, suspect of idolatry and superstition.<sup>17</sup>

Father Ricci developed the Chinese terminology for Catholic theology and also a liturgy. This was the best way to accommodate the Gospel in the Chinese context. He understood that for the Chinese it would be impossible to learn the European philosophical and theological concepts in order to understand the Catholic faith. In this way he created conditions for making Christ and the Gospel known to ordinary Chinese. This was an authentic attempt at “incarnation” of the Word of God within Chinese culture, something that was successfully undertaken already before Ricci by Nestorians known as Syriac Christian missionaries who brought Christian religion called *Jingjiao* 景教 (*Luminous Religion*) to China in 7th century.

To summarize this dimension of apostolic and missionary activity of Ricci we would like to quote the reflection of Pope John Paul II who succinctly describes originality and greatness of Ricci’s apostolic work by stating that

From his first contacts with the Chinese, Father Ricci based his entire scientific and apostolic methodology upon two pillars, to which he remained faithful until his death, despite many difficulties and misunderstandings, both internal and external: *first*, Chinese neophytes, in embracing Christianity, did not in any way have to renounce loyalty to their country; *second*, the Christian revelation of the mystery of God in no way destroyed but in fact enriched and complemented everything beautiful and good, just and holy, in what had been produced and

---

17 Paul A. Rule, “What Were ‘The directives of Matteo Ricci’ Regarding the Chinese Rites?,” *Pacific Rim Report* No. 54 (May 2010), p. 2.

handed down by the ancient Chinese tradition. And just as the Fathers of the Church had done centuries before in the encounter between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Greco-Roman culture, Father Ricci made this insight the basis of his patient and far-sighted work of inculturation of the faith in China, in the constant search for a common ground of understanding with the intellectuals of that great land.<sup>18</sup>

Regarding pastoral dimension of his mission, it is very important to realize that Matteo Ricci promoted establishment of Chinese clergy. He welcomed local vocations and was convinced of the necessity of forming local priests and religious. Later, following this policy of Ricci, the first Chinese Bishop Luo Wenzao 羅文藻 from Dominican order will be educated by an Italian Jesuit Lodovico Buglio (Li Leisi 利類思) and will become a promoter of Ricci's accommodation method as well as formation of indigenous clergy. M. Ricci understood that in this great country every foreign missionary will have difficulties with their reliability, because in the Chinese mind and culture a distance and distrustfulness against strangers was very deep-rooted. The necessity for Ricci was to organize a structure for the Church based upon Chinese conceptions. The first step was just to teach and prepare the converts for the evangelization of China.

The fundamental motivation of Matteo Ricci was to gain China for Christ and for the Church, thereby continuing the dream of Francis Xavier. The motivation came also from the Ignatian spirituality which was fundamental in his formation for religious life. His missionary dynamic was based on the principles of his Jesuit religious life that come from "The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus" and from "The Spiritual Exercises." These principles are: "the salvation of the souls," "omnia ad maiorem Dei gloriam," the Ignatian "magis," "the finding of God in all things" etc. Undoubtedly, he found the energy and the power for the realization of these ideals in prayer and in the permanent examination of consciousness. Al-

---

18 John Paul II, *Matteo Ricci: per un dialogo tra Cina e Occidente*, "Message of Pope John Paul II to the Participants in the International Conference Commemorating the Fourth Centenary of the Arrival in Beijing of Father Matteo Ricci," 24 October 2001, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2001/october/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20011024\\_matteo-ricci.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2001/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20011024_matteo-ricci.html).

though many times he had no possibility of eating or praying (especially a breviary) because of the many visits of the mandarins and intellectuals, nevertheless he prayed late into the evening when the interlocutors went to sleep.<sup>19</sup> Matteo Ricci had so many visits that once he started thinking even about establishing the place for discussions instead of the Church.<sup>20</sup>

For his mission in the “Middle Kingdom” or “Country of the center” (中國 *Zhongguo*), it was necessary to be very delicate, conscious, careful, wise and intelligent. In a word, he had to be a man according to Jesus’ words: “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Mt 10:16). Ricci tried to be this kind of man. He was well known among the Chinese for his humility. Father Ricci, having just after arrived in Beijing, wrote a *Memorial* to the Emperor Wanli 萬曆. He introduced himself as a celibate religious who did not seek the *privilege at court*, but he asked only to be able to *place at the service* of His Majesty his own person and to teach the sciences which he had acquired in the West from which he came from.<sup>21</sup> One of the Chinese officials, a mandarin and scholar highly esteemed named Wu Zhongming 吳中明 wrote about Ricci and observed that “this Father is modest and asks for nothing; he finds his pleasure in practicing virtue and honoring heaven; every morning and evening resolving to guard his thoughts, words, and actions.”<sup>22</sup>

Ricci’s spirituality and humility manifest itself also in the way he esteems the gift of life. Once two musicians asked Ricci to compose words for a song. He wrote a series of moral maxims in short form. In one of them, entitled *The true way to longevity*, he explains:

---

<sup>19</sup> See Dunne, *Generation of Giants*, p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> “I do not think that we shall establish a church, but instead a room for discussion and we will say Mass privately in another chapel, or perhaps use the reception hall for chapel; because one preaches more effectively and with greater fruit here through conversations than through formal sermons.” Ricci, *Opere storiche*, vol. II, 215, quoted by Dunne, *Generation of Giants*, p. 46.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ricci, *Opere storiche*, vol. II, p. 496.

<sup>22</sup> Ricci, *Fonti Ricciane*, vol. II, 59, n. 5, quoted by Dunne, *Generation of Giants*, p. 67.

True longevity is reckoned not by the number of years but according to progress in virtue. If the Lord of Heaven grants me one day more of life, He does so that I may correct yesterday's faults: failure to do this would be a sign of great ingratitude.<sup>23</sup>

Matteo Ricci, even when he worked with great success, used to designate himself "minimo fratello," "figlio indegno," "poveretto," and therefore always asked his friends for prayers. He preferred to speak about favourites of his Chinese brothers but about his state of mind he spoke very rarely. This conviction is expressed by his following statement: "As for me, there's nothing to say except that I am very happy - God be praised - and ready to suffer anything He may wish for the conversion of China through His grace."<sup>24</sup>

Matteo Ricci was a person who had a great ability and gift for cultivating friendship. He gained lots of friends, and always at least respect from the people with whom he had contact. Knowing the importance of friendship, he constantly built up good and sincere relations with the Chinese during his twenty-eight years in the country. Later he wrote a short treatise "On friendship" ("De Amicitia," *Jiaoyoulun* 交友論).<sup>25</sup> This treatise, firstly produced in Nanjing in 1595, has had great success in China. This friendship with the Chinese is a great testimony to his loyalty, sincerity and fellowship with the others. In his work he defined a friend as "the other half of myself, indeed another 'I.'" For M. Ricci the reason for friendship is mutual help as well as mutual need. He deeply realized that "his message could not be accepted unless he himself was accepted. He practiced true friendship as the foundation of exchange and dialogue. Ultimately, his spirituality was a spirituality of friendship."<sup>26</sup>

---

23 Quoted by Vincent Cronin, *The Wise Man from the West* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1984), p. 171.

24 Quoted by Cronin, *The Wise Man from the West*, p. 208.

25 Matteo Ricci, *On Friendship: One Hundred Maxims for a Chinese Prince*, trans. Timothy Billings (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

26 Raguin, *Ways of Contemplation East and West*, p. 335.

Ricci profoundly and sincerely loved China because he found his God to be present there as a result of Ignatian practice of *Contemplatio ad Amorem*, which helped him to find God in the whole creation including foreign culture. He was the witness of the love of God for the Chinese. This was the Ricci's true aim and desire to show to the Chinese the real love of the Creator of all the peoples. Because he was a friend of the Chinese, he became really one of them. He not only believed that the friend is "the other half of himself" or even "another I" but he really fulfilled these words, because he took not only the habits and dress of the Chinese, but also in the spiritual sense, he became a Chinese in his identity, metaphorically yet existentially "Chinese with the Chinese."<sup>27</sup> Not only did he get to know better "the other part of himself," but he collaborated and served this "other part." Regarding his personality and spirituality, the Pope John Paul II said that:

Father Matteo Ricci made himself so "Chinese with the Chinese" that he became an expert Sinologist, in the deepest cultural and spiritual sense of the term, for he achieved in himself an extraordinary inner harmony between priest and scholar, between Catholic and orientalist, between Italian and Chinese.<sup>28</sup>

In the end of his terrestrial life Matteo Ricci predicted that the best advancing of mission in China would be his death. He wanted his body to remain in Beijing as a sign that he came to China not to conquer, but to offer something. He was convinced also that his spirit could do more after death than an already weak body on earth.<sup>29</sup>

Ricci's spirituality was summarized by Yves Raguin as a "spirituality of adoration and service." Indeed, for Raguin

The spirituality of Matteo Ricci is built on the relationship we have with the Lord of Heaven, source and master of everything. It is based

---

<sup>27</sup> The phrase "Chinese with the Chinese" was coined much later by a great missionary Josef Freinademetz, SVD (1852-1908) who described in this way his own self-transformation that he underwent in China.

<sup>28</sup> John Paul II, *Matteo Ricci: per un dialogo tra Cina e Occidente*.

<sup>29</sup> See Cronin, *The Wise Man from the West*, p. 263.

on a concrete anthropology, which elaborates on the nature of the human being for describing one's relation with the Lord of Heaven. Ricci's spirituality reflects a deep sense of the greatness and profundity of humanity, and has its foundation in *ren* (humanity). The Chinese scholar says that *ren* means love, so the Lord of Heaven is bound to love human beings.<sup>30</sup>

### RICCI'S ACCOMMODATION METHOD

Ricci's accommodation strategy was based on four particular approaches namely, first, accommodation to Chinese culture which later will be called inculturation, second, the "top-down" approach meaning propagation of the faith from the elites or upper class and educated people down to the ordinary citizens, third, the propagation of the faith through the medium of science and art, and fourth, cultivation of an openness and respect of Chinese values and traditions.<sup>31</sup>

Ricci dreamt about making Christianity widespread in China, yet he was a realist. He knew that Christianity as an exotic religion could never succeed in "the country of the Dragon" if it does not find some prudent way into country with such a long history and rich culture. The only way was to adapt the Gospel to the Chinese culture and context in the same manner as in the Judeo-Greco-Roman context. The Chinese case was more difficult, because the Chinese tradition was older than those into which Christianity entered in Europe. Besides, the philosophical and cultural understanding of the Chinese was quite different from that of Europeans.

Ricci did not start immediately the direct evangelization realizing that it will not produce its effects in a country with such a radically different and rich culture. He decided to build the trust through making known his scientific expertise in different fields and freely sharing his knowledge with the Chinese scholars. Gradually, at some point he could little by little

---

30 Raguin, *Ways of Contemplation East and West*, p. 333.

31 Leonardo Sacco, "Matteo Ricci and the Metaphor of the Bridge between Civilizations. Some critical remarks," *Storia, Antropologia e Scienze del Linguaggio*, Anno XXXIV, fasc. 1 (gennaio-aprile 2019), p. 47.

introduce certain elements of Western philosophy and Christian revelation.<sup>32</sup>

Vincent Cronin describing the way of proceeding wrote about M. Ricci that during his whole life:

(...) he had respected Chinese susceptibilities, believing that to do otherwise was unpardonable egoism. He had used tact and gentleness, realizing, with profound sympathy, the difficulties which faced a Chinese confronted with a strange religion. He had laid down that the mysteries of faith must be gradually unfolded, otherwise irreparable shock and damage would be done to Chinese sensibility and natural pride. Afterwards, when grace had worked its miracle, the heights and depths of faith could be revealed. Moreover, after life-long study of Chinese practices he had decided that just as slavery had been tolerated in early Christian centuries until the time should be ripe for its abolition, converts might fulfill their two traditional duties, the veneration of Confucius and the dead members of their family.<sup>33</sup>

Matteo Ricci's efforts originated that branch of studies about Chinese culture that for today's scholars, sinologists, missionaries and theologians has become a fundamental channel and link between the West and Chinese culture. Matteo Ricci built the spiritual and cultural bridge of exchange between Chinese culture, science, philosophy and Western heritage. Even more we should appreciate Matteo Ricci's humble attitude towards Chinese culture, which was free of prejudice, and full of respect for the others. John Paul II underlines that "what the Chinese people particularly admire in the scientific work of Matteo Ricci in China is his humble, honest, disinterested attitude, not inspired by ulterior motives and free from bonds with any type of foreign, economic or military power."<sup>34</sup>

---

32 "Between lessons in cosmology and geometry, Master Ricci discoursed little by little on Christian doctrines." R. Po-Chia Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1551-1610* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 123.

33 Cronin, *The Wise Man from the West*, p. 267.

34 John Paul II, "Address on the Work of Father Ricci in China," *International Fides Service*, no. 3178, NE 461 (6 November 1982), p. 71.

Thanks to profound knowledge of Confucianism and the classics in general, Ricci worked hard to show the harmony between Christian doctrine and Confucian teachings trying to find a connection between the oriental and occidental traditions of philosophy and religion. As Tang Yijie argues, in order to reach this harmony Ricci applied such methods as “Linking Catholicism with Confucianism (*heru* 和儒),” “Concordance with Confucianism (*furu* 符儒),” “Complementing Confucianism (*buru* 补儒)” and lastly “Transcending Confucianism (*chaoru* 超儒).”<sup>35</sup>

Ricci was fully aware that the process of accommodation of Christianity to China would take a lot of time and the same for China to know and trust Christian religion and its representatives. Knowing sensitivity of the Chinese literati, Ricci did not want to shock them with the message about Christ passion and crucifixion or even resurrection. This reluctance provoked sometimes a strong criticism from other missionaries, however Ricci wanted to wait patiently until the moment comes when Chinese adepts were ready to receive the Christian message.<sup>36</sup> When he sensed that somebody is well prepared then “he would talk freely about those mysteries, and he would give them some catechetical texts which he had prepared for this purpose. Ricci’s patient method of evangelization reflects his respect for the Incarnation at work in the culture.”<sup>37</sup>

In his address commemorating the four-hundredth anniversary of Ricci’s arrival in Beijing, John Paul II eloquently summarized his contribution stating that “Father Ricci forged a Chinese terminology for Catholic theology and liturgy, and thus created the conditions for making

---

35 Tang Yijie, *Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity and Chinese Culture* (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1991), pp. 336-344.

36 On one occasion, Ricci wrote that his was not yet a time for reaping in China, nor even for sowing, but rather a time for clearing the woods. On another occasion, he wrote that the success of the Jesuits’ apostolate should not be judged by counting the number of Christians only, but by the strength of the foundation they were establishing for a very big enterprise.” Meynard, “The Venerable Matteo Ricci,” p. 96.

37 Meynard, “The Venerable Matteo Ricci,” p. 94.

Christ known and for incarnating the Gospel message and the Church within Chinese culture."<sup>38</sup>

Regardless of some missionary shortcomings and limitations in the approach of Ricci due to historical context and the specific theological background of his time, nothing can undermine or discredit the importance of Ricci's missionary success and his contribution to bridging two different civilizational realities of the East and the West. There were certain things that later will need to be developed and maybe even treated differently by his successors. In this regard Paul Chung says that "Ricci's legacy will remain a springboard for his followers to improve upon his limitations in terms of engaging the wisdom of other religions."<sup>39</sup>

## FROM ENCOUNTER TO TRANSFORMATION

In the course of interaction with so many Chinese people, both Ricci and his interlocutors underwent cultural, intellectual and spiritual transformation. We should not fail to consider seriously the fact that Ricci's specific approach was due to this profound transformation he experienced in the course of the dialogue. As a matter of fact, as a result of this process "Ricci encountered the Chinese Christ, an experience by which he was himself altered and shaped by the Other. This was a truly Christian experience, which led Ricci to renounce, like Christ, the illusion of egotism and self-power, opening his life, through the mediation of the others, to the presence of the Father in the Chinese culture."<sup>40</sup>

Ricci was profoundly shaped by the Chinese.<sup>41</sup> In his authentic spirit of dialogue, he was able to encounter the "Chinese Christ" as reflected in the traditional Chinese values and in the life of Chinese people. He manifested deep friendship and empathy toward Chinese who sincerely and

<sup>38</sup> John Paul II, *Matteo Ricci: per un dialogo tra Cina e Occidente*.

<sup>39</sup> Paul S. Chung, "Mission and Inculturation in the Thought of Matteo Ricci," in *Asian Contextual Theology for the Third Millennium*, eds. Paul S. Chung, Kim Kyoung-Jae and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Eugene, OR: Puckwick Publications, 2007), p. 324.

<sup>40</sup> Meynard, "The Venerable Matteo Ricci," p. 92.

<sup>41</sup> Nicolas Standaert, "Matteo Ricci: Shaped by the Chinese," *Thinking Faith* vol. 21 (May 2010), pp. 1-8.

generously responded with their openness thus triggering a self-transformation in Ricci himself.<sup>42</sup>

In order to proclaim Christianity to Confucian elites of literati Ricci decided to become one of them, started to study classics, particularly Confucian philosophy which was a way of life and more philosophy than a religious system. Gradually he started to live as Confucian scholar hence his accommodation approach of assimilating Confucian values and teachings characterized his being in relation to the educated Chinese. This consciously or unconsciously became part of his new identity and while believing that by becoming Chinese scholar he may gain new converts among Chinese, he himself

became more Chinese than Western and came to occupy a space between the lines – not a bridge in the proper sense – thereby blurring the cultural boundaries between China and Europe. Ricci's example teaches us that is not easy to embrace the viewpoint, beliefs and values of another people as an accommodation without a deeper transformation in one's own uniqueness.<sup>43</sup>

His experience teaches us a very important lesson that it would be very difficult or impossible to assimilate and embrace a different axiological system or cultural worldview in the process of accommodation if one does not allow that a deep transformation takes place in his own person.<sup>44</sup>

From the personal experiences of this great missionary, we learn how important it is to promote authentic and respectful dialogue between different cultures and traditions in order to deepen mutual understanding and strengthen peaceful co-existence. He showed that regardless of differences, it is possible to enter and live in other cultural contexts by following certain fundamental rules. The person entering the host culture needs to consider himself as the guest, respecting the traditions of the place and gradually integrating them into his own life. The guest should manifest

---

42 Meynard, "The Venerable Matteo Ricci," p. 96.

43 Sacco, "Matteo Ricci and the Metaphor of the Bridge between Civilizations," p. 77.

44 Cf. Sacco, "Matteo Ricci and the Metaphor of the Bridge between Civilizations," p. 77.

his humble, loving, and sincere attitude of openness ready to share his own gifts and resources with a host culture for the sake of mutual enrichment. That person, moreover, needs to have “a spirit of discovery to find out and learn from the existing culture of its unique way of manifesting the true, the good, and the beautiful, and, in turn, to be rediscovered in its own culture and tradition”<sup>45</sup> because everybody has always something to contribute to others as all have their own original way of manifestation of the divine through their respective culture.

Ricci’s accommodation method has proven that his and Christian approach was not any dishonest and subversive attempt at misleading others through manipulation but a sincere desire to contribute to the Chinese culture offering the richness of the Christian wisdom. On the other hand, encounter with Chinese traditions influenced the way Christianity understood itself in the context of the mission.<sup>46</sup> As Pope John Paul II points out, Ricci’s experience with the Chinese people manifests that Christianity and its message “would not bring any damage to Chinese culture, but would enrich it and perfect it (...) the Christian faith does not in fact imply abandoning one’s culture, nor does it mean diminishing loyalty to one’s own country and its traditions, but rather, that the faith permitted them to offer a richer and more qualified service to their country.”<sup>47</sup> After Pope John Paul II, also his successors, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis continuously reiterated the great admiration Catholic church has toward Chinese culture and Chinese people hoping for continuous improvement of relationships with China based on respect and creative collaboration for the benefit of all. Venerable Matteo Ricci, whose process of beatification is underway, will continue to be an inspiration for a fruitful dialogue with China full of challenges but also great opportunities.

---

45 Hu Yeping, “Matteo Ricci and His Method of Cultural Accommodation,” in *Thinking with/for Many Others: In Memory of Vincent Shen (1949-2018)*, eds. João J. Vila-Chã & Hu Yeping (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2022), p. 177.

46 “This is probably one of the deepest insights Ricci has to teach us: if God created the wonderful culture and traditions of China, then the Chinese cannot but have something to say about God himself.” Meynard, “The Venerable Matteo Ricci,” p. 97.

47 John Paul II, “Address on the Work of Father Ricci in China,” p. 70.

## CONCLUSION

Matteo Ricci became an example of the inculturation and evangelization of China. As a promoter of accommodation, he can be considered a forerunner of the Vatican Council II, and a very important personality for Christian missions and for history of cross-cultural relations with China. Almost four hundred years after his death his work and mission remain a precious heritage for the presence of Christianity in China, which is studied and developed even today.

Ricci's estimation of the Chinese culture through which God reveals himself – as Ricci believed – is a great example for modern inculturation and the attitude of the Church toward all cultures and religions. Matteo Ricci's attempt to improve a dialogue with the Chinese culture and religions – especially with Confucianism – is an inspiration and an example for the modern theology of religions and for interreligious dialogue even though some of his views today would be incompatible with the modified approach of the Church toward other religions especially after Vatican II. Still, his attempt at acculturation widened the perspectives of theology, evangelization, and the interpretation of other cultures. He is a pioneer of inculturation and accommodation of Christianity in China. He said at the end of his terrestrial life: "I leave you facing an open door" to China.<sup>48</sup> Ricci contributed greatly to the intercultural exchange and communication between the East and the West. His legacy is an invitation and still a great challenge waiting for undertaking and further development of such a fascinating as well as promising task of cross-cultural exchange and dialogue with China.

## REFERENCES

- Cassady, Joel. "Matteo Ricci and His Process of Evangelization." *Obsculta* vol. 3, no. 1 (2010): 5-10. <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol3/iss1/4>.
- Chung, Paul S. "Mission and Inculturation in the Thought of Matteo Ricci." In *Asian Contextual Theology for the Third Millennium*, edited

---

48 Italian original: "Ho aperto una porta per voi tutti: sappiate tenerla spalancata."

- by Paul S. Chung, Kim Kyoung-Jae and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, pp. 303-328. Eugene, OR: Puckwick Publications, 2007.
- Cronin, Vincent. *The Wise Man from the West*. London: Fount Paperbacks, 1984.
- Dunne, George H., S.J. *Generation of Giants. The Story of the Jesuits in China in the last Decades of the Ming Dynasty*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962.
- Hsia, R. Po-Chia. *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1551-1610*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Hu Yeping. "Matteo Ricci and His Method of Cultural Accommodation." In *Thinking with/for Many Others: In Memory of Vincent Shen (1949-2018)*, edited by João J. Vila-Chã & Hu Yeping, pp. 165-177. Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2022.
- John Paul II. "Address on the Work of Father Ricci in China." *International Fides Service*, no. 3178, NE 461 (6 November 1982): 66-72.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Matteo Ricci: per un dialogo tra Cina e Occidente*, "Message of Pope John Paul II to the Participants in the International Conference Commemorating the Fourth Centenary of the Arrival in Beijing of Father Matteo Ricci," 24 October 2001. [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2001/october/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20011024\\_matteo-ricci.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2001/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20011024_matteo-ricci.html).
- Meynard, Thierry, S.J. *Matteo Ricci. À la découverte du Christ chinois*. Collection Sur la route des saints. Bruxelles : Fidélité - Éditions jésuites, 2022.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Venerable Matteo Ricci." *The Journal of the Macau Ricci Institute (MRI)*, Issue 11 (March 2023): 87-98.
- Minamiki, George, S.J. *The Chinese Rites Controversy*. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985.
- Mungello, David E., ed. *The Chinese rites controversy. It's history and meaning*. Monumenta Serica T. XXXIII. Nettetal-Sankt Augustin: Steyler Verlag, 1994.
- Needham, Joseph. *Science and Civilization in China*. Vol. I. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1954.
- Raguin, Yves, S.J. *Ways of Contemplation East and West: Part One to Four*. Taipei, Taiwan: Ricci Institute for Chinese Studies, 1993-2001.
- Ricci, Matteo, S.J. *Opere Storiche del P. Matteo Ricci S.I.*, edited by P. Tacchi Venturi, S.J., 2 vols. Macerata: Primiato Stabilimento Tipografico,

Avv. Filippo Giorgetti, 1911-1913.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Fonti Ricciane: documenti originali concernenti Matteo Ricci e la storia delle prime relazioni tra l'Europa e la Cina (1579-1615)*, edited by Pasquale M. P. D'Elia, S.J., 3 vols. Roma: La Libreria dello Stato, 1942-1949.

\_\_\_\_\_. *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matteo Ricci 1583-1610*. Translated from the Latin by Louis J. Gallagher, S.J., with a Foreword by Richard J. Cushing, D.D., LL.D. New York: Random House, 1953.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (T'ien-chu Shih-i)*, edited by Edward J. Malatesta, S.J. St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985.

\_\_\_\_\_. *On Friendship: One Hundred Maxims for a Chinese Prince*. Translated by Timothy Billings. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

Rule, Paul A. "What Were 'The directives of Matteo Ricci' Regarding the Chinese Rites?" *Pacific Rim Report* no. 54 (May 2010): 1-8.

Sacco, Leonardo. "Matteo Ricci and the Metaphor of the Bridge between Civilizations. Some critical remarks." *Storia, Antropologia e Scienze del Linguaggio*, Anno XXXIV, fasc. 1 (gennaio-aprile 2019): 41-116.

Spence, Jonathan D. *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*. London-Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988.

Standaert, Nicolas, S.J. "Matteo Ricci: Shaped by the Chinese." *Thinking Faith* vol. 21 (May 2010): 1-8. <http://www.thinkingfaith.org>.