

Priceless Friendship — Matteo Ricci's Legacy

Some years after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security advisor in the USA, considered Eurasia as a “Grand Chess Board”,¹ open for centuries for conquests or trade along the branches of the Silk Road.

The “chess board” was equally a cultural “crossroad”, hence its world historical importance. Famous travellers from West to East have left their names in these exchanges. Alopen, a Syrian monk and his companions were the first to introduce Christian faith when they settled in Chang'an in 635. Others missionaries would follow, famous also for their diplomatic role: Piano del Carpini (1182-1251) and Giovanni da Montecorvina (1246-1328), when the Mongol expansion and the Muslim Mamelouks were threatening Eastern Europe and the Near East. Niccolò, Maffeo and Marco Polo (1254-1324) had explored and related with marvel many places in China. Conversely, from East to West, a Christian monk of Turkish Uyghur origin born near Khambaliq, (Beijing) Rabban Bar Sauma 拉賓掃務瑪 (1220-1294), on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, was sent on an embassy to Europe in 1280, to ask for help against the Mamelouks.

Later on, beyond the end of the “Great Game” plaid by the British and the Russian Empires during the nineteenth century, the diplomatic pendulum continued its sway until now, as two contributions of this issue explain. There is no need to recall that China had not been left untouched in-between during the earlier age of maritime explorations. Portuguese and Spanish colonial expansions, which clashed around the world, had to be assigned respective zones — imposed on them at Tordesillas (1492), near Madrid. But a duty was attached to the agreement: both crowns had to support and “protect” the expansion of the Christian missions (the so called *Padroado*) in their zones.

It is in this bellicose context worldwide that Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), the fourth centenary of whose death is celebrated this year, enters the Chinese scene. At 30 years of age he had received a long formation in Europe.² He was to spend the second part of his life mainly in southern China, in different places along his journey towards the capital, Peking that he reached only nine years before his death. Allowed to reside in the imperial city, he hoped to be admitted to an audience with the Emperor Wan Li, who never granted it. His purpose was to ask for the permission to present the Christian faith in China. Yet through his friendly contacts with many officials, men of letters, doctoral candidates, scholars, Buddhist monks, mandarins, he engaged in serious conversations. His technically trained prodigious memory, his mastery of the language and of its script, the training he had received in Mathematics, Cartography, Astronomy, Music and his publications helped him to attract the attention and progressive admiration of his listeners. As he was able also to amend the calendar so important for the Emperor to rule along the will of Heaven, Ricci, by placing the Chinese Empire at the centre of his Global Map implicitly showed that the Chinese people was at the core of the Lord of Heaven's care (as any other nation)... It is thanks to this friendly approach, so wisely respectful of important traditions—the veneration of family ancestors, of the Emperor and of Confucius the Sage—, that he was so well received. At his death, the court officials obtained from the Emperor, who had never met him, that solemn funerals be held in his honour in the imperial city. As explained in two other contributions of this issue, his successors would follow in his steps either by translating the Chinese Classics into foreign languages or by adopting Chinese spiritual traditions. Despite the tragedy of the Boxers' Rebellion, who in 1900 desecrated the Zhalaan cemetery, it is meaningful that Ricci's remains had been sown on the Chinese soil like precious seeds waiting to bear fruit.

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¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, 1998, 240 pages.

² See: Gianni Criveller, “The Background of Matteo Ricci: the Shaping of his Intellectual and Scientific Endowment”, *Chinese Cross Currents*, Vol. 6, No.4, 2009, pp. 72-93.