

R. Po-Chia Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552-1610* (Oxford University Press, 2010), xiv + 359 pages, including Chinese glossary, Bibliography and Index

The fourth hundred anniversary of Ricci's death in Beijing in 1610 was marked by a number of conferences and publications, including three biographies in English language. In *Matteo Ricci, A Jesuit in the Ming Court* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), Michela Fontana delved into the cultural, political and scientific dimensions of the encounter (the book was originally published in Italian as *Matteo Ricci, un Gesuita alla corte dei Ming*, Mondadori, 2005; it is also available in French). Also, Mary Laven came out with another biography, entitled *Mission to China: Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit Encounter with the East* (Faber and Faber, 2011). The biography under review here appears to have a better academic standing than the two previous, since its author, Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, professor at Pennsylvania State University, is indeed fully qualified for the task. Educated both in Hong Kong and in the West, he is able to read the primary materials in Chinese, Italian and Spanish (though not in Latin, it seems). Also, he brings his own expertise in the fields of history, philosophy and religious studies, which he had developed over the years with a few research articles on the Jesuit mission in China and Japan. Finally, he consulted an important second literature, especially in Chinese. The result is quite honest, yet short of the expectations.

The book title catches the eyes: it evokes the breakthrough of a Jesuit having penetrated at the heart of the political power of the Chinese empire. Yet, the title does not reflect the substance of the book, since the last chapters only deal with Ricci's stay in the capital. Also the title is misleading: though Ricci did penetrate within the Forbidden City, yet he was allowed there only on a couple of occasions, in order to repair the famous clocks he brought in. We may have expected a more sober title from Oxford University Press.

The structure of the book does not show any sign of originality: the chapters follow Ricci's journey, according to his own account of his life and mission in China (*Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e Cristianità nella China*). The chapter titles are simply the names of the places where Ricci stayed.

The first chapter, Macerata and Rome, provides a useful background on Catholic reformation and the newly founded Society of Jesus. In a Catholic world in rapid transformation and facing many challenges, the Jesuits represented a new vision of *christianitas*. Ricci's vocation as a Jesuit was carried by this intellectual and geographical expansion which would shape his future mission.

The second chapter, the Portuguese seas, opens with a lengthy account of the hardships of a six-month sea travel, from Lisbon to Goa. More interesting is how Ricci lived and interacted with Indian culture, since we may glean here some precious indications on the way he would operate in China. In fact, the Indian stop-over of four years (1578-1582) turned out to be quite a disappointment for Ricci himself. The Portuguese presence was typically colonial, aiming only at managing a military and commercial enterprise in the area. The Portuguese, including the Jesuits among them,

were not really interested in missionary activities among the indigenous population, not to say about learning anything about Indian culture. Ricci complained in his letters being caught in a college very similar to any Jesuit college in Europe. Ricci's theological training had nothing stimulating, being a pale replica of the training at the Roman College. In brief, circumstances completely prevented Ricci to make a meaningful encounter with Indian culture. Yet, we may discern in his attitude toward the Indians the way he would behave later with the Chinese: being a true cosmopolitan, Ricci was not rigidly attached to a national identity (Italy as a nation did not even exist), and he was keen in developing relationships with foreign cultures on an equal basis. This is why Ricci expressed in a letter to the Superior General his dissatisfaction with the racial discrimination being implemented in the college of Goa, where indigenous people were barred entry to philosophy and theology. On the contrary, Ricci supported admitting Indians among the Jesuits and giving them equal treatment and status.

The three following chapters are not centered on the figure of Ricci but on Ruggieri's. Though this long excursus disrupts a bit the narrative, yet it provides a new light on Ricci as being the follower and companion of Ruggieri. The chapter Macao starts with the establishment of the city by the Portuguese in 1552, as well as the first attempts of missionaries to enter China (the Jesuits Barreto and Góis in 1555, the Dominican Gaspar de Cruz in 1556, the Jesuit Francisco Perez in 1563, and four Franciscan friars in 1579). All these attempts failed because of a lack of understanding of the Chinese language and customs. The breakthrough came with Ruggieri: the Jesuit visitor Alessandro Valignano instructed him to learn the Chinese language, both spoken and written. Ruggieri visited Guangzhou a first time during the spring fair of 1580, and, on the fall of the same year, was authorized to reside on land. In 1582, at Zhaoqing, he met Chen Rui, the Supreme Commander, or *zongdu*, who gave a sumptuous dinner with opera entertainment in his honor and granted him the permission to settle in Zhaoqing. However, Chen Rui was shortly after removed from office and Ruggieri was forced to go back to Macao. Meanwhile Ricci stayed in Macao, studying the language. In his letters from Macao, he criticized again the Portuguese Jesuits for their lack of missionary zeal, but unlike as in Goa, he expressed admiration for a non-Western culture, China.

Chapter 4, Zhaoqing, describes the first permanent Jesuit outpost in China: with the approval of Guo Yingping, the new Supreme Commander, and the protection of Wang Pan, the local magistrate, the Jesuits were allowed to settle there on September 1583, near a Buddhist temple. The first successes were obtained in 1584, with the publication of the first catechism in Chinese, the *Tianzhu shilu*, by Ruggieri, and the printing of the first world map in China, by Ricci. Yet their presence was surrounded by many threats: the xenophobia of the local habitants, the precarious finances of the mission, and the project of a Spanish armada launched from Manila. More problematic, the protection granted by Wang Pan was based on a misunderstanding: this one believed that the Jesuits were worshipping a female deity bearing a child, similar to the bodhisattva Guanyin. Having been married for thirty years and still childless, Wang Pan hoped to obtain a son through the new deity brought by the

Jesuits. One year after the arrival of the Jesuits, Wang Pan got a son and believed it was thanks to the new deity. Yet, Wang Pan was not unsophisticated, but well educated and, in fact, a refined poet. He became one of the many *literati* who would assimilate Christianity to a new form of Buddhism. For Hsia, the friendship between Ruggieri and Wang Pan fits perfectly into the pattern of the patronage of Buddhist monasticism by the *literati*. The author stressed that most of the converts in Zhaoqing were Buddhist: when they embraced Christianity, they did not truly reject Buddhism, but they only substituted some liturgical and doctrinal elements for others. Therefore, we can see in the first catechism, the *Tianzhu shilu*, the paradoxical position of the Jesuits: even though they presented themselves as Buddhist monks and were drawing a lot from Buddhist concepts, yet they openly rejected Buddhism.

The Chapter 5, entitled Ruggieri, reappraises the importance of a man who has largely been eclipsed by Ricci in the historiography of the Catholic mission: “With hindsight, it is easy to forget that Ruggieri was in fact the founder of the Jesuit mission in China, the pioneer in learning Chinese, and the author of the first Christian work published in the Chinese language” (97). The poems written by Ruggieri reveal that he had a good command of the written Chinese, even if his spoken Chinese was not as good. In the end of 1585, Ruggieri and Almeida traveled to Shaoxing, Zhejiang, the hometown of Wang Pan, and even had his father baptized. In spring 1586, when Ruggieri returned to Zhaoqing, the political situation had changed, with Wang Pan withdrawing his support to the Jesuits who were only allowed to stay two at a time. Also, Ruggieri was falsely accused of adultery and the residence was attacked. Finally, Liu Jiezhai, the new Supreme Commander, decided to expel the Jesuits from Zhaoqing because of their close association with Macao, perceived then as a military threat.

Concerning the controversial question of Ruggieri’s departure from China, the author advances as main reason that Ruggieri himself suggested the need for a papal embassy and so Valignano decided to send him back to Europe. A subsidiary reason is that Valignano considered Ruggieri not good enough in Chinese and not so prudent, choosing Ricci against Ruggieri as head of the mission. However, Ruggieri’s mission failed because of the successive deaths of two popes and also because the Vatican court was too busy with political turmoil in Europe.

Chapter 6, Shaozhou, tells the five years of Ricci in that city. There, he met with a few successes: a fruitful collaboration with Qu Rukui (Qu Taisu) in explaining the *Elements of geometry* of Euclid, some thirty converts, an effective discourse in repudiating geomancy, the protection of local officials, and the constitution of a network of relations. Yet the Jesuits met with great oppositions, which constantly endangered their position: the hostility of neighbors who attacked the house at night and where Ricci got injured, the death of two companions, Almeida and de Petris, both in their early thirties. All these hardships made Ricci quite depressed and homesick, as his letters reveal. Yet, Ricci bounced back from this low ebb in his life: he decided to give a new orientation to the mission, not focused on religious proselytizing but on intellectual dialogue. This implied to discard the Buddhist accoutrement and adopt the Confucian one, to thoroughly study the Chinese Classics,

and to rewrite the *Tianzhu shilu*.

Chapter 7, Nanchang, explains the three years there as the turning point of Ricci's career, standing between the twelve years of frustration in Guangdong and the twelve years of triumph to come in Nanjing and Beijing. In 1595, Ricci dreamed that God would be favorable to him in Peking, same as Ignatius of Loyola had a vision that God would be favorable to him in Rome. While Jonathan Spence had highlighted the importance of the Memory Palace by Ricci, the author here dismisses the *Xiguo xifa* (*Western mnemonics*) as a useless method for the Chinese, already steeped in a long tradition of phonetics and etymology. On the contrary, the *Jiaoyoulun* was an immediate success since it echoes the Confucian view on friendship. Ricci wrote also the first draft of the new catechism, the *Tianzhu shiyi*, and had it circulated among friends. Ricci interacted with many scholars and officials and gained himself the reputation of a scholar. In his letter, Ricci showed greater confidence as the Chinese started to recognize the superiority of Western learning in many areas.

The Chapter 8, Nanjing, is the longest of the book, with some thirty pages. Though Ricci spent only 15 months there, yet "he achieved more in that short time than in any other period of his long sojourn in China" (177). Notably, Ricci published a new edition of the world map, with more detailed astronomical knowledge, as well as the *Qiankun tiyi*, in which Ricci proved, from the point of view of Aristotelian and Scholastic categories, that the Chinese theory of the five elements was wrong and should be substituted with the Western theory of the four elements. Three groups gravitated around Ricci: those attracted to Ricci because of his literary fame and his connection to Qu Rukui; those interested in mathematics and astronomy; and the Confucian literati with strong Buddhist commitments. The felt proximity between Christianity and Buddhism compelled Ricci to develop a more sophisticated argumentation against it, which he used in his debate with the abbot Hong'en (194-198).

Chapter 9, Beijing, presents the way Ricci developed his support network in the capital, cultivating relations with three ministers of state and one grand secretary. He also befriended Li Zhizao, who collaborated with him in a reprint of the world map, and Feng Yingjing, a high official famous for his uprightness, who wrote a preface to the *Tianzhu shiyi*.

Chapter 10 presents the *Tianzhu shiyi*, published in Beijing in 1603. This book articulates two ideas that Ricci had developed along the time: first, the basic convergence between Christianity and Confucianism in ancient time (an idea matured before 1599); second, the subsequent distortion of Confucianism under the influence of the foreign teaching of Buddhism (an idea which he matured after the debate with the abbot Hong'en). Hsia resumes and makes insightful comments on each chapter of the book. For him, the *Tianzhu shiyi* is not only a masterly synthesis of Confucianism and Christianity, but also a rejection of Buddhism as a distortion of the ancient teaching. Drawing from Ricci's journal and letters, the author shows that Ricci's attacks against Buddhism were not only on the intellectual level, but could at times become very partisan: Ricci even rejoiced in the setbacks and deaths of some Buddhist devotees in a palace affair, in a way that the author judged not charitable.

Despite being generally meek and courteous, Ricci could also be very militant in his fight against all the real and imagined enemies of Christianity.

Chapter 11, *Laying the Foundations*, shows the fruitful collaboration of Ricci with new converts, like Xu Guangqi, with whom he translated the first six books of Euclid's *Elements of geometry*. Ricci produced also a translation of Epictetus' *Encheiridion*, entitled *Ershiwu yan* (1605), which became a best-seller, not only because it presented Stoic morality as compatible with Confucianism, but also because of the preface by Feng Yingling, the famous official jailed for his uprightness. This book became for many officials the symbol of a moral stance against misrule and tyranny. The author provides also a detailed account (262-267) of the persecution against the Christian communities in the Guangdong, due to political tensions with Macao, and resulting in the execution of the Macanese Jesuit Wang Mingsha. This account comes as a digression since Ricci was remotely involved in this affair, but yet it makes the point that Ricci was careful in not appearing too closely associated with Macao.

As Chapter 10 was centered on the *Tianzhu shiyi*, Chapter 12 is centered on another book by Ricci, *The Man of Paradox (Jiren shipian)*. Besides, this chapter includes a very interesting correspondence between Yu Chunxi, a Buddhist devotee and Ricci. Having read the *Jiren shipian*, Yu Chunxi was quite deferential to Ricci, suggesting him to read some Buddhist sutras before voicing out irrelevant and misinformed criticisms. The reply letter shows that Ricci did not take the advice but continued repeating gross mistakes on Buddhism. For Ricci, there was no discussion about where the truth stands: "The difference between Buddhists and people like me is this: they are empty, I am practical; they are selfish, I am public spirited; they split into many paths, I stay true to the one origin. These are the small differences. They disobey God, I serve God. This is the big difference. That is all" (274). In this letter, Ricci even committed a lie, stating that there has been in Europe no rebellions and wars for one thousand six hundred years! Apparently Ricci grew more and more confident. In 1605, the Catholic community in Beijing climbed over 100. Though Ricci's was very rational, yet he talked in his letters about divine interventions, miracles, inspired dreams and visions. God indeed was favorable to him.

Finally, the epilogue of the volume briefly retraces the history of the Catholic Church and of the Jesuit mission in China after Ricci's death. It also makes a critical evaluation of the scholarship on Ricci, both in the West and in China, from Tacchi Venturi up to Lin Jinshui and Zhu Weizheng.

I have enjoyed reading the book, which is also a journey in Late Ming China, with lively depictions of the places where Ricci stayed, accompanied by beautiful illustrations. Though this biography does not deeply transform our understanding of Ricci, yet it brings some new insights.

First, the author examines the sources with a critical eye in order to get a more authentic picture which had been partially obscured by the posthumous glorification of Ricci. Though the narration is sympathetic to Ricci, stressing his respect, admiration, politeness and friendliness to the Chinese, yet the author does suggest some weaknesses and ambiguities. On the side of the weaknesses, Ricci was

depressed during his stay in Guangdong: surrounded by xenophobia, he expressed in his letters a feeling of dissatisfaction with himself. Even after his success in the capital, he felt isolated from the people he loved in Italy, cut from the ecclesiastical and intellectual world he had left. He was homesick (indeed communication at that time was difficult and slow). Yet, all this makes Ricci more humane and more genuine than the idealized image of the hero. On the opposite direction, Ricci could be overconfident. Though he showed a great flexibility in learning Chinese culture, yet he had a clear feeling of the superiority of the West in many areas, especially in science, due to the objective gap between the West and China, even though this assumption was based on erroneous knowledge. Also, after Ricci had decided to reject Buddhism and to complement Confucianism with Christianity, he often attacked Buddhism, though he had a little understanding of it and no real interest in studying it. Thus, this biography gives us a more realistic image of a man who, despite his genius and holiness, had also obvious limitations.

The second new insight in this biography is to present detailed portraits of the Chinese whom Ricci met. For this, the author drew from his own scholarship, but most often from the recent scholarship available in Chinese. We meet with Wang Pan, “the shadowy but powerful patron of the Jesuits” in Zhaoqing (89-92), Qu Rukui (Qu Taisu), an adulterer banished by his family and who became interested in Ricci because he believed him to be an alchemist (120-127). There is also Zhang Huang, the famous Confucian scholar of Nanchang, who had renounced official career and devoted all his life to study and self-cultivation. Zhang Huang belonged to the school of Wang Yangming, stressing the importance of innate moral knowledge. Within this school, he was attached to the Jiangyou branch, which attempts at balancing inner knowledge and knowledge of the physical world. Zhang Huang was opposed to the the Taizhou branch which attempted to synthesize Confucianism, Daoism and Confucianism, emphasizing meditation and challenging social norms (157-163). Others portraits also include: Jiao Hong, a follower of the school of Wang Yangming, attached to the Taizhou branch (188-191) and Li Zhi (191-194), an iconoclast who relinquished official positions. I think it is justice to present these people because, without their friendship and intellectual stimulation, Ricci could not have developed his work.

The third insight is to stress the ambivalent position of Christianity toward Buddhism: even though Ricci decided in Shaozhou to reject Buddhism, yet the Buddhist predicament accompanied Ricci all along his life, because precisely, as Hsia suggests, the Christian message attracted mostly these Confucian *literati* leaning toward Buddhism. Therefore Ricci constantly needed to distinguish Christianity from its closest competitor, what he did with the abbot Hong'en in Nanjing, and with Yu Chunxi in Beijing.

Finally, a last regret: the copy-editing of the book is far from perfect, and the reader will find many repetitions, grammatical mistakes, bad spellings and incorrect transliterations. It seems that the publication was rushed in order to coincide with the 2010 anniversary.

Overall, this biography would be of interest to anyone who wishes to know more

about the first cultural and intellectual contact between China and the West. At a time where the discourses on economic trade and balance power tend to occupy all the space, this biography is an important reminder about the necessity of a mutual engagement in the dialogue of thoughts.

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