Did Ricci put China at the Centre of his World Map?

By Gianni Criveller

In October 1584 Matteo Ricci had a big surprise for his visitors at the Jesuit residence in Zhaoqing. He had just completed a *Complete map of the world's mountains and seas* (輿地山海全圖 *Yudi shanhai quantu*), the first edition of his world map. No original copies of this particular version are extant, but later Ricci produced, with the collaboration of his learned friends, new editions of his highly successful world map. These editions appeared in Nanjing, in 1600; in Beijing, in 1602 (two authentic copies of this edition are still in existence), 1603, 1608 and 1609. The third edition (1602), compiled in collaboration with Leo Li Zhizao, had a new title: *Complete map of the myriad countries in the world* (坤輿萬國全圖 *Kunyu wanguo quantu*). The quality of this edition is superior to the previous ones, as it was requested by the Emperor, and it became the standard world map by Ricci that is now reproduced in most books and publications. The fourth edition (1603) was entitled, *Chart revealing the profound nature of the world [two forms* (兩儀玄覽圖 *Liangyi xuanlan tu*). Subsequently Ricci's map had a total of sixteen editions.

It is often claimed, even in prestigious publications and by learned persons, that Matteo Ricci had put China at the centre of his map and even made it bigger than the rest of the world. According to this commonplace, Ricci had placed China at the centre to please his Chinese spectators; or better, as a sign of respect for China and as an example of his accommodation policy: at the time in China, Chinese maps did indeed place "the Middle Kingdom" at the centre.

But is this also true for the Italian missionary? Did Ricci, in fact, put China at the centre of his world map? In a symposium in Macao in November of 2009, cartographer Angelo Cattaneo invited the audience to reject such a notion, which he found obviously mistaken. It is hard to say whether he will be listened to. Hardly anyone today knows that nearly seventy years ago (in 1942), the famous Jesuit sinologist Pasquale d'Elia––in my opinion the best expert on Matteo Ricci that has ever been––had expressed the same hope. He pleaded to his readers to abandon this "tenacious legend" (see below) once for all.[1]

D'Elia had correctly identified the source of this legend: the Jesuit writer and astronomer Giovanni Battista Riccioli's *Almagestum Novum Astronomiam Veterem Novamque complectens* (Bologna, 1651). In this book, considered by many the most important literary work of the Jesuits during the seventeenth century, Riccioli wrote a short biographical note on Ricci life, stating that in his world map, the famous Jesuit missionary placed China at the centre and made it bigger than

[1] Pasquale D'Elia (edited by), *Fonti Ricciane: Documenti originali concernenti Matteo Ricci e la storia dell'introduzione del Cristianesimo in Cina*. 3 vols. (Rome: Libreria dello Stato, 1942–1949). This collection contains Ricci's account of his mission in China, written in 1609-1610, entitled: *Della entrata della compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella Cina.* For this issue see vol. I, pp. 207-212.

the rest of the world so as not to offend the Chinese. Riccioli gives no sources, but his argument is probably based on a poor reading of Nicolas Trigault's *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas suscepta ab Societate Jesu* (About the Christian expeditions to China undertaken by the Society of Jesus, Augsburg 1615), an adaptation and translation of Ricci's chronicle *Della entrata della compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella Cina* , which the missionary had written in Beijing in 1609-1610.

The popular report on China written by Jesuit writer Daniello Bartoli some years later (*La Cina*, Roma 1663), was understood as a confirmation that China was at the centre of Ricci's map. And in fact a cursory reading of Bartoli's narrative would suggest the same. But Bartoli may have intended to state that Ricci had put China in a position more central, if compared to European maps of the period, where China is positioned on the extreme right. After Riccioli and Bartoli, a third source seemed to confirm the notion of China as being at the centre of Ricci's map. The traveler Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri, claimed in his *Giro del Mondo* (Napoli, 1700) that he had seen Ricci's map in Beijing. But, according to D'Elia, the map described by Gemelli Careri must have been a just a typical Chinese map.

Important scholars such as Henry Cordier (1901) and Kenneth Scott Latourette (1929), Virgilio Pinot (1932) and others, repeated in good faith this wrong notion, perpetuating the "tenacious legend" referred to by D'Elia. Of course, reproductions of Ricci's map were hard to find in the pastand the assertions of those scholars, based on literary accounts, are quite justifiable. It took D'Elia careful examination of the issue, checking both written sources and the actual maps, to clarify the matter. The Jesuit scholar was also a good prophet. He predicted, "This legend is tenacious, and I do not know whether, after these honest explanations, it will from now on be definitely abandoned".[2] And it does seem as if it has not been abandoned at all. To the best of my knowledge no Ricci's scholar has ever quoted D'Elia's findings on this matter.

But what did Ricci himself write about his own map? Ricci's references to the world map found in his own chronicle *Della entrata* and in his letters are essential to clarify this matter. In *Della entrata* Ricci mentions the world map on six passages. The first passage describes the event of October 1584 in Zhaoqing, on the printing of the first edition of the world map. Here Ricci stated that some uneducated visitors at seeing that China was not placed at the centre and looked small, were upset and even derided it.[3] For the same reason many years later, in Beijing, Ricci was reluctant to present the map to the Emperor, afraid as he "would be angry and think that the Fathers depreciate China for having portrayed it so small in their map…"[4] Ricci also stated that he put Europe on the extreme left and portrayed it as relatively small, so that Chinese officials would be reassured that European countries are small, and that there was no danger that such small and

[2] Ma questa leggenda è tenace, e non sono certo se, dopo queste oneste spiegazioni, sarà d'oggi in poi definitivamente abbandonata", in D'Elia, *Fonti Ricciane*, I, 211.
[3] "La gente più ignorante cominciò a farsi beffe del tal descrittione", in D'Elia, *Fonti Ricciane*, I, 210.
[4] D'Elia, *Fonti Ricciane*, II, 472.

weak nations could ever invade China.[5] Chinese feared just that, due to the European occupation of Macau and Manila.

Ricci mentioned the world maps sixteen times in his letters, but never mentioned anything about having China at the center. Ricci wrote about how difficult it was for some in the Middle Kingdom to accept the fact that the dimension of China did not comprise three quarters of the whole earth, as they believed.[6]

Let's now take a look at the various map editions, in particular at the most famous 1602 edition with objective eyes. The viewer would see that Ricci did not put China at the center of the world, nor did he represent it larger than other countries. The central meridian falls on the Pacific Ocean, in eastern Japan, leaving Europe, Africa and Asia on the western side (i.e. to the left of the observer), and North and South America on the eastern side (i.e. to the right of the observer).

While praised for introducing scientific knowledge, including advanced geographical and astronomical information from Europe to China, Ricci has been charged by some critics of mixing scientific teaching with the religious one. He has been also blamed for manipulating science as a trick to get conversions. These accusations are an anachronism, since the rigid religion-science dichotomy that exists today was unknown in the early seventeenth century. Science was much more than a tool; it was part of the Jesuit humanistic and theological vision of the world. During the humanism of the Renaissance, science and theology were not separated or opposed each other, but rather part of an unified and coherent vision, as interpreted by the curriculum taught at the Society of Jesus' Roman College, and then codified in the *Ratio Studiorum*.

When in China, Ricci and his fellow Jesuits considered their religious message and science an integrated whole, calling their teaching, at least in the earlier decades of their mission, 'heavenly studies' (天學 *tianxue*). Science and religion supported each other and both were presented in rational terms. If Astronomy was the science that spoke of Heaven and would lead to the knowledge of God; similarly Cartography i.e. knowing the Earth and reproducing it on a map, was a way of participating in the work of Creation.

There is an obvious strategic element in Ricci's missionary method: the presentation of Western knowledge was also meant to elevate Ricci's personal prestige and to show the achievements of Western civilization and, consequently, the value of the missionaries' religious doctrine. Introducing themselves as scholars of material heaven, they hoped to be trusted as scholars of the metaphysical Heaven as well.

The map was, in Ricci words, "*the best and most useful work that could have been done at this time to enable China to give credit to the things of our Holy Faith*".[7] Producing the six editions of the

[5] D'Elia, *Fonti Ricciane*, I, 211.
[6] Ricci to de Fabii, Shaozhou 12 November 1592, in Matteo Ricci, Lettere, (1580–1609), ed. Francesco D'Arelli (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2001), p. 160.
[7] D'Elia, *Fonti Ricciane*, I, 211.

map was at the same time a cultural, scientific and religious experience. Drawing maps of the Earth was not only a tool of missionary strategy, but involved a religious worldview. For a Jesuit cartographer maps were not only a visual representation of geography, but an instrument of knowing and understanding the work of creation. Ignatius of Loyola has taught that by looking at religious images a person can contemplate the mystery of the Incarnation. By analogy, by looking at the graphic representation of the Earth a person can contemplate the work of Creation and encounter the Creator. Making accurate maps was much more than a strategic device, it was a way of accompanying the viewers into an experience of the divine.