

# Matteo Ricci's legacy: a loving patience

Yves Camus, SJ

Matteo Ricci

**400 years ago today, Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci died in Beijing. One of the pioneers of the Jesuit mission to China, he remains a greatly respected figure for the Church and for the Chinese people. In this article, Yves Camus, of the Macau Ricci Institute, introduces us to the man who has been called 'the most outstanding cultural mediator between China and the West of all time'.**

On the day of Matteo Ricci's death, following a short illness, in Beijing on 11 May 1610, the Jesuits of his community gathered around his bed. One of them asked him if he realised that he was about to abandon his fellow members of the Society when they were in so great a need of his assistance. 'I leave you,' he said, 'at a door open to great merits, yet not without many perils and labours.' And, as if it were he laying them to rest, he closed his eyes and very softly went to sleep in the Lord. He was only 58 years old and had been Superior of the whole of the Chinese Mission since 1597.

What was the door he left open? What perils and labours had he foreseen? Only by placing his intellectual formation in its historical context can we answer these questions.

After graduating from the Jesuit secondary school established in Macerata, Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) was sent to study Law at La Sapienza University of Rome by his father, Giovanni Battista, who wanted to secure a better future for his son. But he had not foreseen that Matteo had another idea in mind, and in 1571 he entered the novitiate of the fairly new Society of Jesus, established in 1540, to begin his Jesuit formation. The following years were to be very important in shaping his future, thanks to the men under whose influence he received his formation.

## **Mentors**

The first of these was Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606), his elder by 13 years, and acting master of novices for a few months. The two men would meet again in Asia when Valignano, in 1573, was sent as Visitor of missions to the Indies. The nomination of a Neapolitan to supervise Portuguese-dominated Asia would have been seen as quite controversial at that time. Not only Valignano's nationality, but his apostolic policies of inculturation would later lead to many conflicts in the field. Ricci must have benefited enormously from conversing with him in the novitiate!

Then, from 1572, Ricci was under the guidance of at least two remarkable Jesuits at the Roman College. One was Christopher Clavius (1538-1612) from Germany, a mathematician and astronomer who was the leading figure in the reform of the modern Gregorian calendar. He was one of the main authorities in European astronomy, and would continue to influence astronomical education for over fifty years through his textbooks, which were used all over Europe and relied on by missionaries.

Then there was Roberto Bellarmino (1542-1621), an Italian Jesuit and a Cardinal of the Catholic Church, whose teaching on dogmatics, his pedagogy on controversies and his redaction of a new catechism made him one of the most influential cardinals of the Catholic Church of that period. Matteo Ricci was extremely fortunate to be guided in his Jesuit formation by these three mentors.

In 1577, aged 25, with many other young Jesuits, he applied and was accepted to be sent to the Indies; he reached Goa one year later. There he had to put his formation into practice in unfamiliar surroundings: his job for three years was to teach 'Humanities', that is Latin and Greek, and he had to do so in Portuguese (which he had learned easily in Coimbra as he had to wait for the season when ships could sail to the East). After one final year of studying theology, he was finally ordained priest in 1581. This 'passage through India' must have increased in him the awareness of a contrast between what he learned from Valignano and what he had to do in the field. His apostolic mindset was clearer than ever when, in 1583, Valignano called him to go to Macau. He was to help his elder Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607), who had been struggling on two fronts: to learn the Chinese language and, therefore, to be accepted by other members of his community.

### **The global context**

The reluctance of some missionaries to invest time and energy in learning the local language to better acquaint themselves with the local people was quite contrary to Ignatius's spirit and Valignano's instructions. Had not Ignatius in many of his letters advised Jesuit missionaries: 'Make yourselves loved by your humility and charity, becoming all things to all men. Show that you conform, as far as the Institute of the Society permits, to the customs of the people there'? Or: 'Be prepared to teach matters of faith and morals in a way that is accommodated to those people... Without taking away from them anything in which they are particularly interested or which they especially value, try to get them to accept the truths of Catholicism.' Later, he adds: 'Although you are ever intent on bringing them to conformity with the Catholic Church, do everything gently, without any violence to souls long accustomed to another way of life.' And to do so, Valignano would add, the first step is to learn the local language, a condition *sine qua non*. So, what was the root of this reluctance to do so?

It would not be far-fetched to relate it to the cultural trends of the epoch. The 'renaissance' for 'a new world'[\[1\]](#) in which Valignano and Ricci had been formed had developed in a context of lingering conflicts.

First, there were some similarities with the Cold War period that followed World War II: a continuing state of political conflict, military tension and economic competition. Soon after Christopher Columbus's initial voyage of 1492 that included the discovery of 'the new world', a cold economic competition developed around the world between Portugal and Spain. It was urgent that a treaty, arbitrated by Pope Alexander VI, be signed in Tordesillas (1494) between the two countries in order to prevent continual disputes from flaring up. By an arbitrary line drawn along 'a meridian 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde islands (off the west coast of Africa)', the world was divided into two zones of trade and influence. In exchange for the economic advantages of such an agreement, both powers would provide logistic help and military protection to the missions (the so-called *Padroado*, through which the Vatican delegated to the kings of

Spain and Portugal the administration of the local Church, the construction of churches, the nomination of pastors and bishops, etc.). But the tensions remained vivid, for example in the previously noted appointment of Valignano as Visitor to all Jesuit missions in the East.

Furthermore, the epoch was marked by an intense 'cultural revolution', so to say, that touched upon the place of humankind in the universe. Faith and science were locked in heated debates over the theory of Mikołaj Kopernik (1473-1543), expressed in his book *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* ('On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres'), published just before his death. The case of Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), whose observations supported the Copernican theory of heliocentrism, reached its climax in early 1615 when he was denounced to the Roman Inquisition.

Last but not least, the long Council of Trent had lasted for eighteen years (1545-1563); but it had yet to bear fruit. Its reforms had just begun to be implemented. In such a context of moving landmarks, not a few far away missionaries chose to look for safe ground, and not to seek any local adaptation.

All this considered, when Valignano dispatched Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci to China to try to establish a residence near Macau, they opened, intellectually and spiritually speaking, 'a door ... to great merits' that had not been opened before in this tense, intense and bellicose global context.

#### **'A door to great merits'**

At 30 years of age, Ricci had received a long formation in Europe. He was to spend the second part of his life mainly in southern China, in different places along his journey towards the capital, Peking, which he reached in January 1601, only nine years before his death. Allowed to reside in the imperial city, he had hoped to be admitted to an audience with the Emperor Wan Li (1573-1620), who never granted it. His purpose was only 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 was able to engage in serious conversations, leading some of them to receive baptism in the Catholic faith. His mastery of the language and of its script (in 1588, he had already compiled what was to be the first Portuguese-Chinese dictionary, followed by a second similar work ten years later); his technically trained prodigious memory (he had learned by heart *The Four Books* attributed to Confucius and was able to quote them freely); his publications (his *Treatise on Friendship* [1595], included later in the Imperial Encyclopaedia; *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* [1603], a catechism in the form of a dialogue with a Buddhist monk, among several others); his interest in music (Ricci gave the emperor a clavichord as a present and composed eight songs in Chinese which he sang in the presence of the court in 1601); the training he had received in cartography (there was a third reprint of his famous *Map of the World* [1602]), in mathematics (at that time in Europe, it was considered as the language through which the Creator expressed himself in the creation of the world, hence the important decision to translate the first six books of Euclid's *Elements*, in collaboration with his friend, Xu Guangqi [1607]) and in astronomy (Ricci was able to describe Chinese astronomical instruments, still preserved today, and to understand their usage): all of these helped him to attract the attention and progressive admiration of his listeners.

Nicolas Trigault (1577-1628) would later relate in his *Histoire de l'Expédition Chrétienne au Royaume de la Chine*, that all these efforts were aimed at

‘showing to the literati of this kingdom with what diligence ours conduct their research and on what solid foundations they establish their proofs; and through this, they would come to understand that, in the things of the holy religion, it was not lightly that we had decided ourselves to follow a party.’

It is due to this twin purpose that the literati were able to assimilate ‘Western Learning’ with ‘Heavenly’ or ‘Celestial Learning’. But it is also thanks to the friendly approach, so wisely respectful of important traditions – the veneration of family ancestors, of the Emperor and of Confucius the Sage – that Matteo Ricci was so well received. His successors would follow in his steps, either by translating the Chinese Classics in foreign languages (the first Western edition in Latin of *The Analects* of Confucius had to wait until 1687 to be published with commentaries in Paris)[\[2\]](#) or by adopting Chinese spiritual traditions.[\[3\]](#) At his death, the court officials and the Jesuit community obtained permission from the Emperor, who had never met him, that he be solemnly buried in the imperial city. Despite the later tragedy of the Boxers’ Rebellion, who desecrated the tombs of missionaries in the Zhalan cemetery in 1900, it is fitting that Matteo Ricci’s remains had been sown with others on the Chinese soil, almost like precious seeds for the future...

But how can one explain that, in his peaceful death, Ricci foresaw ‘many perils and labours’ for his successors?

History has told us how right he was.

#### **‘Many perils and labours’**

Firstly, although he had himself chosen his successor in the person of Nicolò Longobardo (1559-1654) from Sicily, who arrived in China in 1597, for his apostolic zeal, Ricci was well aware that the man disagreed with his accommodating approach and respect for the Chinese traditions and values: for Longobardo, this approach was too slow and showed too few results among ordinary folk.

Then, there were the reactions of the literati, at the court and elsewhere, famously analysed and presented by Jacques Gernet in his book *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures* (Cambridge University Press; 1st edition, 1985).

It was to face the consequences of this impact that Ricci’s companions of later ages dedicated themselves in ‘many studious labours’ for nearly two hundred years to historical research, linguistic compilations of dictionaries, translations of the Chinese Classics and numerous scientific publications, until the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773; and then beyond, after its restoration in 1814.[\[4\]](#)

But since Ricci, on his death bed, associated ‘merits, perils and labours’ in his vision, mention must be made also of a controversy among missionaries of diverse religious orders that would explode one hundred years after his death and spill beyond the limits of the Chinese Empire. The Chinese Rites Controversy was a dispute within the Church, in China and in Europe, over whether the traditional practices of the Chinese, already mentioned, and the Chinese appellation of God as ‘The Lord of Heaven’, were incompatible with Christian faith or whether they could be accepted as not being

idolatrous but of civil importance in their practice. The aftermath of the controversy resulted in the banning of much missionary activity in China, and had a devastating influence, even after its cooling down and its conclusion in 1931.

#### **Ricci's enterprise**

In 2010, the celebrations to mark the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Matteo Ricci – the 'Ricci Year' in many places, the World Expo in Shanghai – should not be seen as the end of the story...

Even if Matteo Ricci has been, as Wolfgang Franke has written, 'the most outstanding cultural mediator between China and the West of all time'; or, as Liang Shuming (1893-1988), the famous Chinese philosopher wrote: 'Without encountering the West, in three hundred years or in one thousand years China would still be without electricity and without railways', his enterprise is certainly not yet achieved, as the current state of the world in many respects clearly shows.

But, in the words of Ignatius of Loyola: *Non coerceri a maximo, contineri tamen a minimo, divinum est* – 'Not to be daunted by the greatest enterprise, yet to invest oneself in the smallest one, this is divine.' Matteo Ricci lived by this loving patience.

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*Yves Camus SJ, of the Macau Ricci Institute, is Editor of the Chinese-English quarterly, 《神州交流--Chinese Cross Currents》.*

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[1] 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.

[2] See Thierry Meynard, "The First Edition of the *Analects* of Confucius in the West (1687)" in *Chinese Cross Currents*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (May 2010).

[3] See Michael Saso, "'In the Footsteps of Matteo Ricci': The Legacy of Fr. Yves Raguin, S.J.— Asian Catholic Prayer in Buddhist and Daoist dialogue". *Ibid*.

[4] See "[Jesuits' Journeys in Chinese Studies](http://www.ricci-mac.org/eng/features/index.htm)", accessible at <http://www.ricci-mac.org/eng/features/index.htm>