

## MATTEO RICCI AND JESUIT MISSION JESUIT SCHOOLS

Elected Superior General of the new order, Ignatius Loyola fostered the regular writing of letters by the Jesuits that were spread all over the world. The redistribution of these letters among all the members of the new order was a way to build group cohesion among the scattered community. The letters, devoted not only to religious matters but also to the observation of the natural world and to the analysis of the indigenous societies, will arouse the growing interest of European scholars and ensure Jesuit visibility in the European intellectual world. The letters were also a part of the propaganda required for their missions' success. They relied on propaganda to obtain not only funds but also privileges for their missionary work.

In 1585 they obtained from the Pope the exclusive right to preach in China and Japan, which they preserved until 1630, to the growing irritation of the other religious orders. The need to circulate their letters also gave the Jesuits an acute sense of the importance of printing. They were delighted to find that printing was common in both China and Japan and they made intensive use of it. Moreover, Chinese printing was far less expensive than European printing, didn't have to pass any kind of censorship and could be managed even at home. It allowed the Jesuits to freely publish hundreds of books, both religious and scientific, in Chinese.

In 1548, the Society took a new turn when the governor of Messina asked them to open a primary and secondary school in this Sicilian town. The immediate success of the school had a decisive impact on the new order's trajectory: they became the schoolmasters of Europe. By the end of the 16th century the Jesuits had already opened 50 primary and secondary schools in Italy and also the so-called Roman college, which will soon develop into the first Jesuit University. By the end of the 18th century they had a network of 800 educational institutions around the world, each of them enrolling hundreds of students, and had become the first teaching order around the globe. Certainly other orders had been very active in education especially in the medieval and early modern universities. But Jesuit education was different.

To begin with, they considered the staffing and management of schools as an essential ministry of the order. They erected the buildings for the new institutions, attended to their funding and maintenance, and opened them to boys and young men who didn't intend to be priests at all. Furthermore, Jesuit schools combined the scholastic education taught in the universities with the Classical and literary teachings provided by the humanistic academies. The Jesuits arrived at a turning point for Europe's formal schooling. They didn't start the modernizing movement in education, but they capitalized on what was happening and developed their school system on a previously unknown scale. Furthermore, they were convinced that the proper education of the young would mean an improvement for the whole world: in fact, their initial enthusiasm for education qualified them as first-rate educators. But not in China. They cultivated and edified their Christian converts but they could never encroach on the Chinese education system.

In the 17th century, one Jesuit priest, Verbiest, used his high position in the court to present the emperor with a complete proposal to introduce mechanics, medicine and Aristotelian philosophy in the imperial exams. The emperor flatly refused on the grounds that neither the contents nor the style were in tune with Chinese wisdom. Although the Society of Jesus didn't produce the best cutting-edge scientific figures of the modern era, the Roman College, which opened in 1551, could boast of being at the peak of early modern Catholic intellectual life. Its syllabus included Latin, Philosophy, Theology and Logic, as well as scientific and classical matters and a thorough education in the arts.

One of its teachers was Christopher Clavius, said to be the best professor in mathematics that ever had been: he translated Euclid, and devised the Gregorian calendar, while sticking to a geocentric view of the universe. Another of its teachers was Athanasius Kircher, known as "the last man who knew everything". He created a fantastic museum of scientific, anthropological and archaeological artifacts and wrote 40 books covering almost all subjects. Kircher never went to China, but based on the letters sent by his fellow Jesuits, he published "China illustrata": the beautiful engravings that it contained of Chinese flora, fauna, landscapes and handicrafts conveyed an image of Chinese nature's variety and plenty that ensured it a widespread diffusion throughout Europe.

The Jesuits meditated, preached and taught, but their original impulse was missionary. They went to the East protected by the privileges that the Pope granted them and by the structural network of Portuguese expansion. They were jealous of their independence and proud of their innovative missionary methods, and once in the East, Japan or China, they often came at odds with the other religious orders.

But notwithstanding the growing animosity of their opponents and the already mentioned difficulties for building and teaching that they will encounter in China, the Jesuit mission to China was called to be the jewel of the crown of the Society of Jesus.