

MATTEO RICCI AND JESUIT MISSION MATTEO RICCI'S PROGRESSION IN CHINA

By then, the China mission had already started. Valignano, who didn't **trust the** Portuguese Jesuits already in Macau, had summoned the Italian Michele Ruggieri to come to Macau and to study Chinese during the voyage: not the Cantonese dialect, but the Mandarin used by the officials. It served Ruggieri well: his ability to speak to them in their own language, and his statement that he wanted to be vassal of the king of China earned Ruggieri permission to enter China and procured him a residence in Zhaoqing, a large town in the south, where Matteo Ricci joined him a year later, in 1583. The house was in fact in the backyard of a temple, and this proximity induced the mandarins who attended the temple for ceremonial purposes to go and visit the strange foreigners and take a look at the weird objects that they had on display, like the world map, the clocks or the crystal prisms.

Matteo Ricci was an outstanding scholar, a fervent missionary and a tireless networker. He entered China with the firm belief that if he persuaded the Chinese of the superiority of European culture, he could easily convince them also of the superiority of Christianity. This meant cultivating connections with Chinese elites, where he could find men with sufficient knowledge to debate with him. And to enter their circles Ricci had to adopt their customs: that is, he had to talk, dress and eat like them. The language was essential, because scholars used quite a different register of speech from common people. That is why Valignano had insisted on the need to learn Mandarin and not the local dialects.

How to dress was another important point. The Jesuits did not wear distinctive habits and their first impulse was to dress as Chinese priests. They shaved their heads and beards and dressed in the robes of Buddhist monks. It took Ricci a decade to realize that the Buddhist garb was not a prestigious one at all. In the 1590s the Jesuits threw away their Buddhist habits **and adopted the scholar's robes** that would be theirs thereafter: dark tunics, flared sleeves, covered heads and long beards provided them with much desired respectability. As for eating, Ricci soon discovered that everything in China, including religion, was discussed around a table and this led him to an endless succession of dinner parties, sometimes two or three in a day. He often complains that this continuous eating and drinking,

together with the never-ending debates that went with it, was exhausting and so time-consuming that he didn't even have time to pray.

All these adaptations to the local customs allowed Ricci to make friends with prominent officials of the realm, and a few of them converted. The most important was Xu Guangqi, an outstanding scholar, a loyal friend and a highly influential official. But that didn't solve the problem. In the first place, China was not Japan, and no throngs of baptisms followed the conversion to Christianity of any prominent scholar. In fact, to the dismay of his superiors, the number of converts was alarmingly small. Up to the 1590s, they could count only 15 per year, and most of them elderly and sick. In 1601, already in Beijing and with 17 Jesuit priests in China, converts increased to 150 annually. It was a scanty harvest and thus will remain until the middle of the 17th century.

Ricci was more than once reminded that he was there not to make friends but to make converts. In the second place, Chinese officials were constantly being replaced and all the networking had to begin again with the newcomers. The Jesuits also moved, from Zhaoqing in the south to Nanchang in the center, and then to Nanjing on the Yangzi, but Ricci became convinced that to secure his mission he had to reach the supreme power, that is the court and its emperor.

It took Ricci almost 20 years to make it all the way north to Beijing, where he succeeded in installing a Jesuit mission. He died there and was buried in 1610, a man of great prestige and worthy of an epitaph from the emperor himself, as was usual for foreign ambassadors. His tomb still stands in a small secluded cemetery in Beijing.