

MATTEO RICCI AND JESUIT MISSION JESUIT ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation also involved gaining intellectual prestige among the elites and that meant publishing. Dinner debates consumed a lot of his time but he understood clearly that in China status depended on the written word much more than on orality. As soon as he attained a good Classical Chinese level, Ricci translated and printed on quite a massive scale. Most of the books were religious in content: devotional booklets and a doctrinal catechism entitled "The True meaning of the Lord of Heaven", the name that, after heated discussions, the Jesuits used to name God in China.

The abyss dividing Christian and Chinese religiosity is made clear by the fact that there is no single Chinese character meaning God. The Jesuits had to combine two existing characters, meaning The Lord of Heaven, a name that Chinese Catholics still use today. It's worth noting that the great majority of the books translated to Chinese by the Jesuits were for devotional use. Other books dwell on social matters like the one "On Friendship", a collection of sayings mainly from Latin and Greek Classical authors, embracing values that could be easily accepted by the Chinese. This book brought Ricci more prestige and popularity than any other he wrote. And he also published scientific books, one of them being Euclid's "Elements" in Chinese, which he translated with the help of his most prestigious convert Xu Guangqi.

His most overwhelming success, though, came from a world map that he hung up at the entry of the Jesuit residence in Zhaoqing. The Jesuits attributed the interest Chinese scholars had in European science and technology to their own proselytizing efforts, but in fact, the diffusion of **the Jesuits' scientific texts** was only possible because the Chinese scholars were interested in science and technology well **before the Jesuits' arrival**. As one scholar has put it, the Jesuits didn't open a dialogue they entered one that was already well in place. But accommodation also implied the acceptance of local beliefs as long as they didn't run contrary to Christianity. Accommodating with Buddhism and Taoism was out of the question, but the Chinese also practiced a lot of rituals and ceremonies that could be more easily accepted, and that the Jesuits grouped together under the name of Confucianism, a word coined by them. The ancestor cult could be understood as a

family ceremony, the ethical contents of the sayings of Confucius could find parallelisms in the Classical culture of the West, and their deep reverence for Heaven could be reminiscent of a Christian message that had been forgotten. As one scholar put it, the Jesuits manufactured Confucianism. The Chinese response to the Jesuits was far from enthusiastic. There were practical reasons for this, like the **Jesuits' rejection of polygamy**, when all the Chinese officials had a train of women and concubines that were inherent to their status. But ultimately the Chinese didn't convert because they had a totally different and well structured view about everything that mattered.

They had elaborated along thousands of years a philosophical system as sophisticated as the western one: and both cosmologies were utterly incompatible. 1,500 years before, another foreign religion, Buddhism, had succeeded in taking root in China. It had taken centuries and a thorough adaptation to the Chinese worldview that had sensibly modified the initial religious message. Moreover, Buddhism is a religion without a God, while Christianity comes with an exclusive Creator God, a notion totally alien to the Oriental tradition. And the Buddhist aim to suppress suffering is much more attractive than the Christian aim to justify it.

On the other hand, recent scholarship has shown that Chinese scholarly circles viewed the Jesuit Christian mission with great suspicion. Chinese texts have been translated that, even showing respect and sympathy for Ricci, **disdain the Jesuits'** insistence on using scientific teachings with hidden second thoughts. One scholar has labeled the Jesuit mission as an enterprise of seduction. In fact, for all their efforts and all the edifying letters that they sent, their imprint never came close to shake the foundations of the Chinese world. But they did contribute to shaking the foundations of Europe when the philosophers made Confucius the patron saint of the Enlightenment and in his name called for a lay society governed by scholars instead of aristocrats.