

MATTEO RICCI AND JESUIT MISSION RADA'S AND RICCI'S MENTORS

Friars and Jesuits took different paths once in China. But was it so from the start?

Let's look at the similarities and differences between two prominent figures in the story of 16th century China, Martin de Rada, an Augustinian friar, and Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit.

To begin with there is a huge difference in time: Rada spent just 45 days in China; Ricci spent 27 years. This difference highlights the framework with which they entered China. Martin de Rada was part of a colonial project that had religious ramifications, while Ricci was part of a religious project with only an initial shadowy dependence on the Portuguese Padroado.

Rada's colonial context meant that he had many fronts to attend to: his letters reveal an intense dedication to the problems of the Philippines and a constant and time-consuming confrontation with the Castilian colonists.

Rada was also subject to the whims of the governors, who required his services to fix the geographical position of the islands that they intended to occupy. It was at the whim of one governor that Rada was sent to Borneo, where he died.

In comparison, Ricci's movements were much more free and dedicated exclusively to establishing a Christian mission in China. Looking at their portraits, the two men seem strikingly different. Rada is clothed in his monastic habit, displays a distinctive tonsure and has a small breviary in hand.

All the other objects are related to his scientific activities: a couple of books with seemingly geometric figures, a globe and a spotting scope. On the other hand, Ricci is dressed in the dark silken tunic of a Confucian scholar, he displays the abundant beard that adds respectability to aged officials, has his head covered, and hides his hands inside flared sleeves in a gesture of respect.

The only element that accompanies him is the anagram of the Society of Jesus. From a Chinese perspective, Ricci is one of them, while Rada is an outsider. Their direct religious superiors, Alonso de Veracruz in the case of Rada, and Alessandro Valignano for Ricci, were also quite different.

Both came from rich families, as was usual in 16th century missionaries, both were unusually energetic characters, both lived quite long lives, and both were heavily involved in missionary work.

But they viewed their missions from very different angles. Alonso de Veracruz was a man devoted to culture and social justice. He was himself a prolific writer, especially interested in theological, philosophical and scientific matters.

He established the first library in Mexico, ordering sixty boxes of books and complementing it with an impressive array of scientific instruments. Veracruz was also a passionate defender of the Indians. He advocated that only after correcting their abuses, would the Spaniards gain the right to stay in the Indies.

Rada's position regarding the Spanish colonization of the Philippines followed exactly this line. Valignano was a very different man. He thoroughly despised the African peoples, deeming them to be naturally inferior, and felt quite awkward with the Indian tribal cultures.

He thought that only the highly civilized, white peoples of East Asia, the Japanese and Chinese, suited his missionary project exactly. His genius was for organizing and administering. He was extremely active in Japan, fostering the Jesuit participation in the Macau-Japanese trade, organizing the administrative control of Nagasaki by the Society of Jesus, sending the Japanese embassy to Europe and convincing the Pope to grant exclusive rights to the Jesuits to evangelize the country.

He started the Chinese mission, choosing Ruggieri and Ricci as the best suited for it. He devised a strategy of cultural accommodation and encouraged Ricci to study the language, the Chinese Classics and the cultural customs of the mandarins. And he made sure that the whole Society of Jesus backed the mission and gave it all the support necessary for its success.